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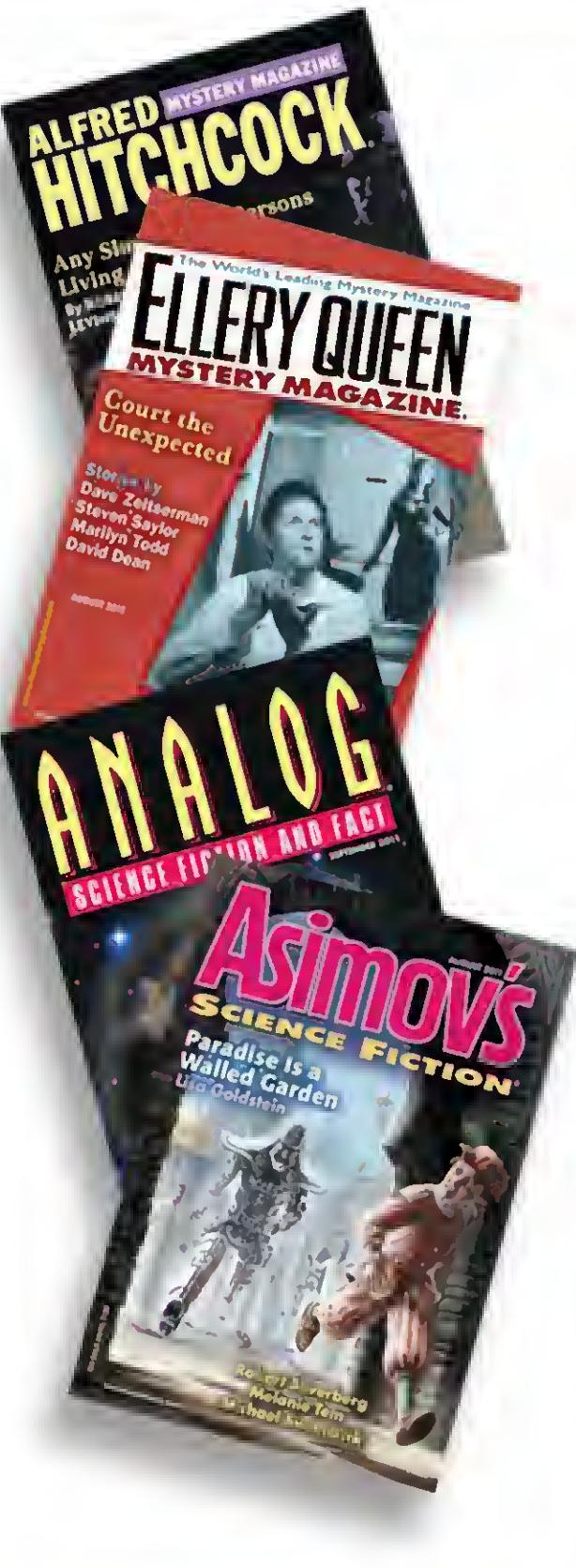
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THE SECRET SHARER

I have always been intrigued by science fiction stories about characters who share one body, and, perhaps, one mind. This fascination may have arisen from reading Hal Clement's signature novel, *Needle*, at my father's suggestion. I was enthralled by the young boy and the four-pound symbiotic life form dwelling within his body who hunt down the parasitic interstellar villain that has seized control of another human being. Of course, my interest in stories about people with a shared consciousness could also have been piqued by Robert Heinlein's ribald novel, *I Will Fear No Evil*, which I sneaked away from my dad and devoured before he could attempt to declare it off limits.

Heinlein's story, about an old man whose brain is transplanted into the-brain-dead body of a young woman only to discover that the body has somehow retained her conscious mind, was published in 1970. It is in some ways similar to the myriad tales of telepathy that were so popular during the Cold War. In those stories, the characters could share intimate details, but they had their own bodies to return to in the morning. In Heinlein's novel, the characters must coexist in the same terrain. Critics panned *I Will Fear No Evil*, but to my unfettered teenage mind the idea was kind of awesome.

While aliens and reanimated bodies weren't really available to mystery and other mainstream authors, these writers accomplished similar special effects by creating characters who suffered from dissociative identity disorders. Stories about characters that don't know they are the murderer can be traced back to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. These tales became even more common after the publication of Flora Rheta Schreiber's novel *Sybil* in 1973. Characters suffering from DID were generally unaware of their multiple personalities, however, and, unless they were part of a comedy routine,

the separate identities rarely engaged in a dialog.

Science fiction does have its share of stories about characters with buried second personalities who are following their own agendas. In SF, though, the explanation for the buried personality isn't a psychological one. The willing suspension of disbelief serves us well here. We are able to accept, at least till the story's end, that the assassin actually has been implanted or that ancient immortal entities really are calling our shots.

What these stories share with their mainstream counterparts is that the body is never in the possession of more than one personality at the same time. The characters do not carry on an interior dialog with each other. As with the original Sybils of ancient Greece, or Professor Trelawney in Hermione Granger and Harry Potter's divination class, the primary personality disappears when the submerged entity takes over.

An Asimov's story that does feature entwined characters is Robert Silverberg's 1987 Nebula finalist, "The Secret Sharer." This tale shares the title with and is a tribute to Joseph Conrad's 1910 novella. Both stories feature inexperienced captains who don't let on to their crew about a stowaway. Conrad's story has an excellent title. The stowaway secretly shares space in the captain's quarters, and clearly shares the major secret of his presence with the captain. Bob takes the title metaphor a couple of steps further. His stowaway is the matrix of a young woman's mind. She isn't just sharing physical space with the captain, she's sharing space within his psyche. If there are no barriers to thought, how can the main character fail to share his deepest secrets with this disembodied passenger?

With the stowaway in his mind, the protagonist is able to find a level of courage he's never known before. We realize that even when she leaves, the young captain will have been forever

changed by this journey. Bob's story is subtle and insightful. I wouldn't compare it to the Heinlein novel, but a story about two human minds commingling is probably more closely related to that book than to Hal Clement's adventure tale.

Direct descendants of the Hunter in *Needle* would have to be the Trill—symbiont aliens featured on various episodes of Star Trek. The Trill are a small slug-like species that can exist within the body of a humanoid alien. The long-lived slug passes the memories of previous hosts along to its companion. I always felt that these characters failed to live up to their full potential. The depth of knowledge that should have been handed from one generation to the other just didn't seem to be there.

An *Asimov's* story that treats this subject well is Benjamin Rosenbaum's 2004 Nebula award finalist "Embracing-the-New." Here, tiny parasites called "Ghennungs" hang onto the outside of their host's body. These creatures can be inherited, giving their hosts the vivid memories of their ancestors, and new parasites can be accumulated. A dialog doesn't actually occur because the Ghennung's thoughts are integrated into the other being's consciousness, but the host is diminished when a connection is lost.

Will McIntosh's Hugo award winning story "Bridesicle," which appeared in the January 2009 issue of *Asimov's*, is another story that plays with the concept of multiple minds sharing one body. In this bittersweet tale, people can carry uploads of the dead. Will does a lovely job exploring the pluses and minuses of this strange situation. He is expanding the story into a novel, and I look forward to reading the book when it appears.

It would be fun to put some of these different sorts of stories about the secret sharer together in an anthology. Keeping the murderer's identity hidden might be tricky in a book like this, because the reader would be on the lookout for that submerged personality. Still, I think the idea of two entities peering through a single pair of eyes would stay vibrant from story to story because there are so many different ways to approach that mysterious hitchhiker of the mind. O

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LIFE IN THE FUTURE

I went to Europe recently, and as take-off time approached I settled back in my seat and opened the hefty book I had chosen to read on the long flight—an old paperback edition of Stendhal's *The Red and the Black*, which I had last read during my college days, nearly sixty years ago.

The flight attendant, checking to make sure I had fastened my seat belt, smiled and said, "Imagine that! You're actually reading a real book instead of a Kindle."

She was smiling. She was simply being playful, I think—my white beard instantly marks me as being a member of the pre-Kindle generation. But maybe she was genuinely surprised to see such an archaic artifact as a *book* in use in this twenty-first-century cabin. A glance around at my fellow passengers showed them to be staring into bright screens everywhere—Kindles, iPads, and other kinds of tablet-style gizmos. I was the only one who had an actual book in sight, a book which was, a matter of fact, fifteen or twenty years older than she was. I returned her pleasant smile and said something like, "Yes, a book. They're a wonderful invention, books."

Kindles are wonderful inventions too. So are iPads and Nooks and their ilk. I've seen my friends using them and I'm filled with admiration for the technological ingenuity that allows you to load a whole library of books on a device that will fit in an overcoat pocket, and carry it around the world with you. It happens that I don't own one, not because I don't think they are wonderful and tremendously useful and all that (I carry two or three thick travel guides with me on my overseas trips, and how convenient it would be to have them on my Kindle instead of creating big bulges in

my suitcase), but simply because I don't want to bother with learning the ins and outs of yet another gadget, and remembering to keep it charged, and trying not to lose it as I travel from place to place, and so on and so on. Call it gizmo fatigue, I guess. I've reached an age where I'm content not to live on the cutting edge.

I wasn't always like that, of course. I'm a science fiction writer, and science fiction writers are supposed to have an interest in the future. In order to write convincingly about the future, a writer needs, at a bare minimum, to stay up to date with the present, right? And so I did, for most of my life. I have never, until recently, turned away from futuristic gadgetry. I had a tape recorder when tape recorders were startling new gadgets, back in the 1950s. I bought one of the earliest electronic calculators—you would be amazed at how big and clunky it was, and how much it cost—when I got tired of adding up numbers by hand in long dreary rows. When Mazda, the Japanese auto company, came out with its revolutionary rotary-engine car in 1971, I bought one of those. I was the second person I know to buy a video-cassette recorder, circa 1978. (The first person I knew who bought one was Harlan Ellison, who was such an early adopter that he bought a Betamax, Sony's technologically superior but badly marketed version of the VCR, which soon was made obsolete by the VHS model that rapidly established itself as the industry norm. Harlan had to buy one of those, too, because the Betamax vanished from the marketplace.)

And I was one of the first science fiction writers to do his work on a computer. I began shopping for one as far back as 1978, but the computers that were

available back then were crude things that used tape decks for their memories, and experts advised me to wait a little while to buy, since the state of the art was improving so swiftly. By the time I did buy, in 1982, the tape deck was history and my first computer sported a magnificent ten-megabyte hard disk. I acquired many another fascinatingly futuristic gadget as the microprocessor revolution went churning along. A wireless telephone unit to carry in my pocket as I moved around the garden. A pocket-sized tape recorder to carry in the car, so that I could make memoranda about story ideas that occurred to me while I was driving. A Walkman to provide me with ambulatory music. (The term "Walkman" may mean nothing to you: think iPod and you'll know what it was.) An electric toothbrush. A TIVO video recorder and a DVD player, which together made the old videocassette recorder seem as antiquated as writing on clay tablets. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I was never one to shun a useful new device.

But time does pass, and the gods have granted me the favor of longevity, and here I am living in the far future I used to write about, and, well, I just don't feel like keeping up with all that stuff any more. Though most days I have trouble believing it, I'm closer to eighty than I am to seventy, and the thought of coping with one more user's manual now gives me the willies. (They don't even provide the manuals any more, anyway: generally you have to look for them on line.) And so—for the time being, anyway—I have shrugged and let the Kindle and its cohort pass me by. I tell myself that I can get along perfectly well with old-fashioned books, even if they do make my suitcase bulge. Poor old Bob Silverberg, you are thinking. He's had it. Once upon a time he was really something, but he's just a pathetic old geezer now, angrily waving his cane as the twenty-first century passes him by. Well, maybe. But let me quote one of my favorite bits of wisdom about getting old to you. It comes

from Robert Sheckley's introduction to his 1979 short-story collection, *The Wonderful World of Robert Sheckley*. (Never heard of Sheckley? You should investigate him: the author of some of the cleverest SF stories ever written, whose work is just now emerging from a long period of unfair eclipse.) What Sheckley said was,

The current audience for science fiction is a young person's audience. I am not a young person, curse the luck. I was writing these stories when a lot of you weren't even born yet, or were crapping your diapers. Please don't hold that against me. I don't like being old any more than you will.

There's a marvelous dagger-thrust at the end of that paragraph: "I don't like being old *any more than you will*." Mocking the old simply because they're old is not only cruel, it's dumb, because the young, if they are lucky enough to survive a few years, will find themselves old themselves one day, just as weary, just as puzzled, just as obsolete as today's geezers are right now. Nobody starts off with an oldster's attitude toward the modern world, but everybody gets there, sooner or later. Even science fiction writers like Sheckley or Silverberg or X or Y or Z, who once were so sassy and edgy, and who lasted long enough to find Kindles and iPads unnecessary in their current lives. That doesn't mean that the science fiction they wrote when they were in their twenties and thirties (or forties or fifties or sixties, for that matter) is irrelevant and obsolete today. Sure, the characters don't use smartphones, and some of them smoke cigarettes, and their slang isn't the kind of slang you speak. You have to make allowances for that. Nobody in Shakespeare has a smartphone, either, but that doesn't mean Shakespeare has nothing to say to modern readers. The stories that the quick-witted young Robert Sheckley wrote in 1952 and 1955 and 1960 still hold plenty for today's SF audience, even though Sheckley himself, over the decades,

grew old and wrinkled and ill and eventually died. That happens to everybody, and, as Sheckley obligingly points out, it will happen to you. But only Sheckley could have written the stories of Robert Sheckley.

I think that my own work has some value for modern readers, too, and, ancient and crotchety though I may now be, I'm eagerly making it available for the new devices that I myself am able to get along without. If you check the current listings of books available for the Kindle, you will find whole handfuls of Robert Silverberg novels ready for downloading. (When I was in the hospital a few months ago for some minor repairs, a technician in the operating room discovered who I was and gleefully downloaded three of my novels to his Kindle *while the procedure was going on*, as he was delighted to inform the very groggy me.) Not only my novels are available for him, but six or seven volumes of my Collected Short Stories, too. And, bit by bit, I'm putting just about everything I've ever written, which is quite a lot, out there for sale on the various electronic media. Just because I have chosen not to partake of those media myself doesn't mean I'm dumb enough to withhold my work from the rest of you, because the rest of you will be reading books via download long after my print-media library is dust.

I do remain mired in my own twentieth-century ways, of course. I can't help that (any more than you'll be able to avoid getting mired in your own twenty-first century ways when the super-cool successor to the Kindle comes along, the one that downloads books right into your mind, and you find it too scary to use.) Although Subterranean Press, the publisher of my Collected Short Stories, has put them all up for sale in electronic form, and I'm quite happy about that, I've been nagging the Subterranean publisher, Bill Schafer, to do them as paperbacks too. It isn't that I don't know that the Kindle editions will outsell any paperback edition by ten or twenty to one.

But some obstinate part of me insists on thinking that the paperback is the *real* book, and the electronic edition is just some ghostly phantom, lacking in tangible substance.

I suppose I'll remain incorrigible in that belief. A couple of years ago, editor Sheila Williams asked me for permission to use my story "Enter a Soldier: Later, Enter Another" in *Enter the Future*, an anthology of stories from this magazine she was compiling. Well, that was nice to hear: I love seeing my stories reprinted in anthologies. I've been in hundreds of them and on dark, gloomy days I get much pleasure from looking down the long rows of them on my shelves. But the twist here was that this particular anthology would appear only in a Kindle edition, which meant that there'd be no new volume for those shelves—indeed, I would never even get to see the book at all.

I may be stuck with one foot in the past when it comes to electronic editions, but I am nobody's fool when it comes to a reprint deal, and of course I told Sheila that I'd be delighted to have my story in the anthology—adding that I'm mildly disappointed not to be able to look forward to a print edition to fondle, but *c'est la vie moderne*, etc., etc. I have no illusions about the shape of future publishing, which in fact is already becoming the shape of present publishing. I will stick to my quaint old paperbacks, I guess, to the continued amusement of airline flight attendants. But it's obvious that electronic reading devices are taking over, and so be it. I will gladly sign up with any e-anthologist who offers me a reasonable fee to reprint one of my stories in an on-line edition, because those who don't bow gracefully to the inevitable get run over by it. I'm all for the new media—except where it comes to my own reading habits, that is. And so my books and stories are out there on them, and it will not upset me at all to see people reading my stuff on their Kindles. O

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OLD PAINT

Megan Lindholm

Megan Lindholm lives in Tacoma, Washington, and has very fond memories of a blue Chevrolet Celebrity station wagon. In fact, she still has a chip of blue plastic that is just visible under the skin on her right knee from a near head-on in 1991. The car is long gone, but oh, how the memories linger. . . . Megan sometimes also writes fiction as "Robin Hobb."

I was only nine when it happened, so I may not have the details absolutely right. But I know the heart of my story, and the heart is always what matters in a tale like mine.

My family didn't have much when I was growing up. A lot of lean years happened in that first half of the century. I don't say I had it as tough as my mom did, but the 2030's weren't a piece of cake for anyone. My brother, my mom, and I lived in subsidized housing in the part of T-town they call New Tacoma. It sure wasn't new when I was a kid. Tacoma's always been a tough town, and my mom said that her grandpa kept her on a short leash and she survived it, and so her kids would, too. Everyone knew we had the strictest mom in our apartments and pitied us for it.

We weren't like a lot of folks in the subsidized housing. Mom was ashamed to be there. It was the only thing she took from the government, and I think if she had been alone, she would have lived on the streets. We got by on what she made working at an old folks' home, so we budgeted hard. She cooked our meals from scratch and we carried our lunches to school in the same battered lunch boxes and stained backpacks, year after year. She mended our clothes and we shopped at the Goodwill. Our cellphones were clunky and we all shared one computer. And we didn't have a car.

Then my great grandpa died. Mom had hardly seen him in years, and we kids didn't know him at all, but she was in his will. She got what was left in his checking account, which wasn't much, and the old furniture in his apartment, which was mostly particle board crap. The old rocking chair was good, and the ceramic canisters shaped like mushrooms were cool. Mom said they were really old and she remembered them from when she was little. But the one big thing he did have was a car, parked in his parking slot where it had been gathering dust for the last twelve years since they'd taken his license away.

The car was vintage, and not in a good way. Back in the 2020's, there was this rage for making new energy-efficient cars that looked sort of like the old classic gas guz-

zlers. People wanted rumble and roomy to go with their solar and alternative fuels. I guess my great grandpa had been a surfer back in the day, because what he chose was something that was supposed to look like a station wagon. The first time we went down to the parking garage and looked at it, Ben, my older brother, groaned and asked, "What is that crap on the sides? Is it supposed to look like wood or something?"

"Or something," my mom said absently. She pushed the button on the key, but the battery for it was long dead. So she opened the car the old-fashioned way, putting the key in a hole in the door handle. I was fascinated and proud of my mom for knowing you could do that.

The outside of the car was covered in fine dust, but inside it was immaculate. She sat in the seat for a little while with her hands on the wheel, acting like she could see out the windshield. She was smiling a little bit. Then she said, "The smart thing to do is sell him. If the interior is this good, I bet he kept the engine cherry, too." She reached down and pulled a little handle, and Ben and I jumped when the hood of the car popped up.

"Mom, I think you broke it," Ben said. "Maybe we shouldn't touch anything until we can have a mechanic look at it." Ben was fourteen then, and for some reason, he now believed that if he didn't know something, Mom didn't know it either. She just snorted and got out of the car and went around to open the hood the rest of the way.

"My goodness," she said softly. "You did take care of him, Pops."

I didn't know what she was talking about, but I do remember that the inside of that engine compartment was spotless. She shut the hood, unplugged the car from the supplemental charger, and retracted the coil. She had a license and knew how to drive, because that was part of her job at the old people's home. I was still surprised when she slid in behind the wheel and put the key in a slot-thing and turned it. The vehicle had an anti-theft box on the steering column. She hesitated, and then put her forefinger on the sensor. "Hello, Suzanne," the car said in a rich, brown voice. "How are you today?"

"Just fine," she said quietly. "Just fine."

Ben was freaked. Mom noticed that and grinned. She patted the steering column. "My grandpa's voice. A little customization he did on the systems." She tossed her head at the back seat. Ben opened the door and we both got in. There were shoulder strap seat belts.

"No airbags?" Ben asked in disbelief.

"They're there. But when he was new, cars had both. It's safe. I wouldn't put you in a car if I thought it wasn't safe." She closed her eyes for a minute and tightened up her mouth as if she'd suddenly wanted to cry. Then she opened her eyes and shifted her grip on the wheel. "Let's blast," she said loud and clear, and the engine started. It was a lot louder than any other car I'd ever heard. Mom had to raise her voice to talk over it. "And when he was new, cars were electric and internal combustion. And much noisier than they are now."

Ben was horrified. "This car is running on gasoline, right now?"

Mom shook her head. "Sound effects. And loudest inside the car. My grandpa had a sense of humor." She stroked the car's dash. "All those years, and he never took me off the security system."

"How smart is this car?" Ben demanded.

"Smart enough," she said. "He can take himself to a fueling station. Knows when his tires are low on air, and can schedule his own oil change. He used to talk to the dealership; I wonder if it's even in business still. He's second generation simulated intelligence. Sure fooled me, most of the time. He has a lot of personality customization in his software. My grandpa put in a bunch of educational stuff, too. He can

speak French. He used to drill me on my vocabulary on the way to school. And he knew all my favorite radio stations." She shook her head. "Back then, people wanted their cars to be their friends. He sure was mine."

"That's wack," Ben said solemnly.

"No, it was great. I loved it. I loved him."

"Love you too, Suzanne," the car said. His voice was a rich baritone.

"You should sell this thing, Mom," Ben advised her wisely.

"Maybe I should," Mom said, but the way she said it, I knew that we had a car now.

Ben had begun to think he was the man of the house, so he tried to start an argument with Mom about selling the car and using that money and her inheritance money to buy a real car. She just looked at him and said, "Seems to me it's my inheritance, not yours. And I'm keeping him."

And so that was that.

She opened a little panel on his dash and punched in our address. She moved a handle on the steering column, and the car began to ease backward. I held my breath, thinking we were going to hit something, but we didn't. She stopped the car, moved the handle again, and we slid forward, smooth as a slide, up and out of the parking garage and into the daylight.

On the way home, she kept pushing buttons and chatting with the car. It didn't have instant-net, but it had a screen that folded down from the ceiling. "What good is that? You have to sit in the back seat to see it," Ben complained. Mom reached under the seat and opened a drawer. Inside was a bunch of old style DVD's in flat plastic cases.

"They're movies," she said. "Supposed to entertain the kids in the back seat. The screen is back there so the driver won't be distracted." She picked up the stack and began to sort through them. She had a wistful half-smile on her face. "I remember all of these," she said quietly. "Some were my favorites."

"So the driver's supposed to just sit up front by himself and be bored?" Ben demanded.

She set the movies down with a sigh and turned to him. "The driver is supposed to drive." She turned back and put her hands on the wheel and looked out over the hood. "When this fellow was built, cars were only allowed to go a short distance without a licensed driver in the driver's seat. Less than a mile, I think it was. The auto-brains were really limited back then. Legally limited more than technically limited. People didn't really trust cars to drive themselves. They had emergency services locators, of course, so they could take you to the hospital if you passed out, and sensors to help you park, but when he was built, drivers still did most of the driving."

"Why do you keep calling the car 'he' and 'him'?" Ben demanded.

"Old habit," my mom said, but she said it in a way that ended the conversation.

We had a parking spot at our building that we'd never used before. The first time we pulled up in the car, every kid hanging around outside came to see what the noise was. They watched as the car plugged in to charge. Our car was about twice as long as any other car in the lot.

"Look at the size of those solars," one boy whispered, and Ben's ears went red.

"Old piece of junk," said another knowingly. "Surprised it still runs at all."

Mom did the one thing that Ben hated the most. I didn't much like it either. All the other moms in the building would have just ignored the wanna-be gangers hanging around the parking lot. Mom always looked straight at them and talked to them as if they were smart, even when they were so drugged out they could barely stand.

"He's old, but he runs like a clock. He'll probably outlast most of the Tupperware crates here. They still used a lot of steel when this guy was built." Mom set the alarm, and the tattle-tale light began to circle the car.

"Wha's that stuff onna size spozed to be?" Leno asked. He was smiling. Leno was always smiling, and I'd never seen him with his eyes more than half open. He looked delighted to see the car, but I'd seen him look just as enthusiastically at a lamp post.

"It's wood. Well, pseudo-wood. My grandpa was so proud of it. It was one of the first nano-products used on any car. It was the latest thing, back then. Guaranteed not to peel or fade or scratch, and to feel like wood grain. Most minor dents, it could repair, too." She sighed, smiled, and shook her head, remembering something. Then, "Come on, kids. Dinner to cook and homework to do."

"Homework," one of the boys sneered, and two girls laughed low. We ignored her and followed Mom into the house.

Ben was mad at her. "How come you know so much about that car? I thought you didn't have anything to do with your grandpa. I thought he, like, disowned you when you were a kid or something."

Mom gave him a look. She never talked much about her family. As far as I remembered, it had always been just her, Ben, and me. Someone must have been our father, but I'd never met him. And if Ben remembered him, he didn't say much. Mom firmed her mouth for a minute and then said brusquely, "My grandpa and I really loved each other. I made some choices in my life that he didn't agree with. So he was really angry with me for a long time, and I was angry with him. But we always knew we still loved one another. We just never got around to making up in time to say it."

"What decisions?" I asked.

"Getting knocked up with me," Ben said, low. Either Mom didn't hear him say it or she didn't want to discuss it.

So, after that, we had a car. Not that we drove it much. But Mom polished it with special wax, cleaned his solars, vacuumed out the inside, and hung up an old-fashioned pine tree scent thing from the mirror. Once we came home from school on the bus, and found her asleep in the driver's seat, her hands on the wheel. She was smiling in her sleep. Every once in a while, on the weekend, she might take us out for a ride in the station wagon. Ben always said he didn't want to go, but then went.

She didn't upgrade the car, but she made it ours. She put us both on the car's security system, and updated the old GPS settings with our home, schools, the hospital, and the police station, so in an emergency either of us could get help. The car greeted us by name. Ben pretty much ignored its personality program, but I talked to it. It knew a lot of corny old jokes and had a strange program called "Road Trip Games" about license plates and "Animal, Vegetable, or Mineral." I tried out every seat in the car. I watched some of the old movies on the little screen, but they were really long and the people talked too much. My favorite seat was the one in the back that faced backward. I liked watching the faces of the people as they came up behind our car. Lots of them looked surprised. Some of them smiled and waved, and some turned their heads to look at the car as they passed us. The only time I didn't like it was at night when the headlights of the cars behind us would hit me right in the eyes.

The car was a sometime thing, and mostly it didn't change anything about our life. Sometimes, when it was pouring rain and we had to walk to the bus stop and then walk home again, Ben would grumble. Other parents sent their cars to pick up their kids from school. Ben whined about this a lot. "Why can't the wagon pick us up from school when it's pouring rain?" he'd demand of her.

"Your grandfather was a 'drive it yourself' guy. Like me. I doubt he ever had the block removed."

"Then it's just a software thing? You could take it off?"

"Don't get any ideas, Benny-boy!" Mom warned him.

And for a while, he didn't. But then he turned fifteen. And Mom decided to teach him to drive.

Ben wasn't that interested at first. Most kids didn't bother with a personal license anymore. As long as a car met the legal standards, anyone could get in it and go. I knew little kindergarteners who were dropped off by their cars each day and then picked up again. Mom said it was stupid that it took three thousand pounds of car to transport a forty-pound kid to school, but lots of people did it. Ben and I both knew that Mom could have had the car's brain upgraded or unblocked or whatever, and we could have had wheels any time we wanted them. But she chose not to. She told Ben the only way he was going to get to use the car was if he knew how to physically drive it. Once he passed his test, she told him that we might even have it updated so that he could just kick back and tell the car where he wanted to go.

So that was the big attraction for Ben. I got to ride along on his driving lessons. At first Mom took us way out of town in the evenings and made him practice in parking lots outside vacant strip malls. But Ben actually learned to drive pretty well. He said it wasn't that different from a lot of his video games. Then Mom reminded him that he couldn't kill himself or someone else with a video game. She was so serious about it, and Ben got so cranky. It was a thing they went through for about a year, I think. Any conversation about the car always turned into an argument. He hated the "dorky" paint and wood on it; she said it was "vintage" and "classic." He said we should get a cheaper car; she said that all the metal in the body made it safer for him to drive, and that he should be happy we had a car at all. Their conversations were always the same. I think Ben said, "I know, I know!" more than a million times that year. And Mom was always saying, "Shut up and listen to what I'm saying."

Ben was absolutely set on getting the car upgraded so he could ride around with his friends. Most of his friends' parents had said "no way" to them riding if Ben was actually driving the car, even after he got his license. He kept telling Mom how the car would be safer if it could drive itself and how we could get better mileage because it would self-adjust routes to avoid traffic or to take short cuts, and that statistics showed that car-brains actually reacted faster than human brains in dangerous situations.

"Maybe so, but they can only react one way, and human brains can think of a dozen ways to react in a tough situation. So the answer is still no. Not yet. Maybe never."

Mom scored big points on him the next week when there were dozens of accidents on I-5 that involved driverless cars. Mom didn't care that it was because of a virus that someone had uploaded to the traffic beam. No one knew who did it. Some people said it was an environmental group that wanted to discourage private cars. Other people thought it was just a new generation of hackers making their mark on the world. "It wasn't the cars' fault, Mom!" Ben argued. "The beacon gave them bad information."

"But if a human had been holding the steering wheel, none of those accidents would have happened," Mom said. And that was the end of it, for a couple of months.

Then in June, Ben and Mom got into it big time. He came home from school one day and took the car without asking. He brought it home painted black, with a rippling hint of darker tiger stripes. I stood and stared at it when he pulled into the apartment building parking lot. "Cool, huh?" he asked me. "The stripes move. The faster you drive, the faster the nanos ripple."

"Where'd you get the money to do it?" I asked him, and when he said, "None of your business," I knew it was really going to blow up.

And it did, but even worse than I'd expected. By the time Mom came home from work, the vintage nanos in the "wood" paneling were at war with the tiger stripe nanos. The car looked, as Mom put it, "Like a pile of crawling crap! What were you thinking?"

And they were off, with him saying that the black made the car look better and

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that the new nanos would win over the old ones and the color would even out. When it came out that he'd raided his college money for the paint job, she was furious.

"It was too good of a deal to pass up! It was less than half what it would cost in a standard paint shop!"

So that was how she found out he'd had it done in one of those car-painting tents that had been popping up near malls and swap meets. They were mobile services that fixed dings in windshields or replaced them entirely. They could install seat covers, and add flames or pin stripes. The shady ones could override parental controls for music or video or navigation systems, erase GPS tracking, and alter mileage used. Or, in the one Ben had gone to, do an entire nano-paint job in less than an hour. With the new nanos, they didn't even use sprayers anymore. They dumped the stuff on and the nanos spread out to cover any previously painted surfaces. The men operating the paint tent had promised Ben that their nanos were state of the art and could subdue any previous nanos in the car's paint.

Mom was so furious that she made us get in the car and we drove back to where Ben had had it done. By law, they should have looked at the owner registration before they nanoed it. Mom wanted Ben's money back and was hoping they had callback nanos that would remove the black. But no such luck. When we got to where the tent had been, there was nothing but a heap of empty nano jars and some frustrated paint crawling around on the ground trying to cover crumpled pop cans. My mom called the cops, because it's illegal to abandon nanos, and they said they'd send out a containment team. She didn't wait for them. We just went home. When we got there, Ben jumped out of the car and stormed into the house. Mom got out more slowly and stood looking at our car with the saddest expression I'd ever seen on her face.

"I'm so sorry, Old Paint," she told the car. And that was how the car got his name, and also when I realized how much her grandpa's car had meant to her. Ben had done a lot worse thing than just paint a car without her permission. I thought that when he calmed down, I might try to explain that to him. Then I thought that maybe the best thing for me to do was to stay out of it.

The paint on the car just got worse and worse. Those old nanos were tough. The wood paneling took to migrating around on the car's body, trying to escape the attacks of the new paint. It looked scabby, as if the car were rotting. Ben didn't want to be seen in the car anymore, but Mom was merciless. "This was your decision, and you are going to have to live with it just like the rest of us," she told him. And she would send him on the errands, to get groceries or to return the library books, so he would have to drive Old Paint.

A couple of months later, my mom stayed home with stomach flu. She woke up feeling better in the afternoon, and went to the window to look out at the day. That was when she discovered Old Paint was gone. My brother and I were on the bus when we got her furious call. "You probably think you are smart, Benny-Boy, but what you are in is big trouble. Very big trouble." He was trying to figure out why she was so angry when the bus went crazy. Ben dropped his phone, bracing himself and me on the slippery seat. Mom told us later that the Teamsters contract with the city had always insisted that every city-owned mass transit unit had to have a nominal driver. So when the bus started honking its horn and flashing its lights and veering back and forth over three lanes, the old man in the driver's seat reached up and threw the manual override switch. He grabbed the wheel and wrestled us over to the curb and turned off the engine.

The driver apologized to everyone and asked us all to sit tight until the maintenance people could come. He called in for a replacement bus, but everyone on the bus heard the dispatcher's hysterical response. Twelve bus break-downs in the last ten minutes, three involving bad accidents, and there were no more replacement buses

to send. In the background, someone shouted that an out of control ambulance had just rear-ended a bus. Dispatch put the driver on hold.

We were only three blocks short of our stop, so we asked to get off and walk. Ben grabbed his phone off the floor, but Mom had hung up and he didn't really want to find out just what she had discovered that had made her so mad. Ben had a lot of secrets in those days, from rolling papers in his gym bag to a follow-up appointment at the STD clinic. Not that I was supposed to know about any of them.

We'd gone half a block when we heard the bus start up. We looked back and saw it take off. I'd never known a city bus could accelerate like that. We were staring after it, wondering what had happened, when a VW Cherub jumped the curb and nearly hit us. It high-centered for just a second, wheels spinning and smoking, and two kids jumped out of the back seat, screaming. A moment later, it reversed out into the street and raced off, still going backward. The teenage girl who had jumped out was crying and holding onto her little brother. "The car just went crazy! The car just went crazy!"

A man from a corner bar-and-grill opened the door and shouted, "You kids get inside now!"

We all hesitated, but then he pointed up the street and yelled, "OMG, now, kids!" and we bolted in as the Hot Pizza delivery van came right down the sidewalk. It clipped the awning supports as it went by and the green-and-white striped canvas came rippling down behind us as we jumped inside.

The place was a sports bar, and a couple of times we'd had pizza there with Mom when her favorite team was in the playoffs. Usually every screen in the place was on a different sports feed, but that day they all showed the same rattled newsman. He was telling everyone to stay inside if they could, to avoid vehicles of all kinds and to stay tuned for updates to the mad vehicle crisis.

Ben finally called Mom and told her where we were, because the tavern owner refused to let us leave by ourselves. When Mom got there, she thanked him, and then took us home by a route that went down narrow alleys and through people's backyards. Every few minutes, we'd hear a car go roaring past on the streets, or horns blaring, or crashes in the distance.

Not every vehicle in the city had gone wild, but a lot of them had, including Old Paint. Mom had been mad because she thought Ben had upgraded Old Paint's self-driving capability by removing the block on his software. She looked a bit skeptical when he denied it, but by late evening the news people had convinced her. The virus was called the "7734, upside down and backward" by the hacker group that took credit for it. Because if you wrote 7734 on a piece of paper and looked at it upside down and backward, it looked a little bit like the word "hell." They said they did it to prove they could. No one knew how they spread it, but our neighbor said that zombie nanos delivered it right to the cars' driving computers. He said that the nanos were planted in a lot of car stuff, from wiper fluid to coolant and even paint. So Ben said there was no proof he'd infected the car when he got it painted, but that was what Mom always believed.

By evening, the internet news said the crisis would solve itself pretty fast. For a lot of cars, it did. They wrecked themselves. Cops and vigilantes took out some of the obvious rogues, shooting out their tires. It made the owners pretty angry and the insurance companies were arguing about whether they had to pay out. The government had people working on a nano anti-virus that they could spray on rogues, but nothing they tried seemed to work. Some people wanted all the auto-recharging places shut down, but people with uninfected cars objected. Finally they decided to leave the auto charge stations open because some of the rogue cars got aggressive about recharging themselves when they encountered closed stations.

Mom tried to explain it to me. Cars had different levels of smartness, and people

could set priority levels on what they wanted the cars to do for themselves. A lot of people had set their “recharge importance” level high because they wanted the car kept charged to maximum capacity. Others had set their cars to always travel as fast as they were allowed, and turned the courtesy level down to low or even off. There was a pedestrian awareness level that was not supposed to be tampered with, but some people did it. Pizza delivery vans and ambulances were some of the most dangerous rogues.

At first, the virus paralyzed the nation. It didn’t infect every car, but the ones that had it caused traffic accidents and made the streets dangerous. No one wanted to go out. Schools shifted to snow-day internet mode. The stores got low on groceries and the only delivery trucks were vintage semis, with no brains at all and old guys driving them.

By the third week, the infection rate was down, and most of the really dangerous rogues had been disabled. But that left a lot of cars still running wild. Some seemed to follow their normal routines, but speeded up or took alternate routes. Kids were warned not to get into infected cars, even if it was the family van waiting outside the school at the usual time, because sometimes those cars behaved reliably, and sometimes they abruptly went nuts. A new little business started up, with bounty hunters tracking down people’s expensive vehicles by GPS and then capturing them and disabling them until the virus could be cured. But some owners couldn’t afford that service, or the car wasn’t worth what the bounty hunters charged.

So Old Paint was left running wild. At first, we’d see him in the neighborhood at odd times. He always drove himself very safely, and he just seemed to be randomly wandering. Twice we caught him in our parking spot, recharging himself, but each time he took off before we could get near him, let alone open his doors. Mom said to leave him alone, and she’d worry about it when the government came up with an anti-virus. Then we stopped seeing him at all.

One night, when Ben was really bummed about not having a car for some school dance that was coming up, he checked Old Paint’s GPS. “That crazy bastard went to California!” he shouted, half impressed by it.

“Let me see that,” Mom said, and then she started laughing. “I took him there one spring break when I told Grandpa I was only going to Ocean Shores. I wiped all the data off his GPS before I came home. I guess the virus must have brought it back into his memory.”

“You did things like that? You’d kill me if I did something like that!”

“I was young,” Mom said. She smiled in an odd way. “Sometimes, I think being a teenager is like a virus. You do things that go against every bit of programming your parents ever put into you.” She made a “huh” noise as if she were pushing something away. She looked over at Ben. “Becoming a parent is the anti-virus. Cured me of all sorts of things.”

“So how come you don’t let me just be a teenager like you were?” Ben demanded.

Mom just looked at him. “Because I learned, the hard way, just how dangerous that can be to a kid. Running wild is a great thing. For the kids that survive it.” She turned off the monitor then, and told us both to go to bed.

In the weeks that followed, Old Paint went all sorts of strange places. Once he went off to some place in the Olympic National Forest where Mom had once gone to a rave. And he spent two days crawling around on an old logging trail near Chrystal Mountain. Mom looked worried when he went off on that jaunt, and the night she discovered that he was now headed for Lake Chelan, she was so relieved she laughed. In a way, it was really cool that Old Paint did all that traveling. Mom would look at his location at night, and tell us stories about when she was a teenager and living with her grandpa and making him crazy. She’d tell us about close calls and

stupid ideas and how close she had come to getting killed or arrested. Ben and I both started to see her differently, like someone who really had been a kid once. She didn't cut us any more slack than she ever had, but we began to understand why.

We kept expecting Old Paint to run out of charge, but he didn't. He'd go sedately through the auto-charge places, I guess, looking like some family's old car. Ben asked Mom why she didn't block him from using the credit card, and she just shrugged. I think she enjoyed reliving all her wild adventures. And he wasn't that expensive. A lot of cars had back-up solar systems, and Old Paint had a really extensive one. Sometimes he'd stay in one place for three or four days, and Mom figured he was just soaking up the rays before moving on. "And if I cut him off, then he may never come home to us." She gave an odd smile, one that wasn't happy and added, "Tough love isn't all it's cracked up to be. Sometimes, when you lock a door, the other person never knocks on it again."

So, as the weeks passed, we watched Old Paint move up and down Old 99. Ben and I went back to walking. All the city buses and delivery vans had been set back to full manual, and all sorts of old guys were chortling about being suddenly employed again. My mom said it was a huge victory for the Teamsters, and some people insinuated they had backed the hackers.

The government people came up with three different anti-viruses, and everyone was required to install them in their vehicles. The trick, of course, was getting the scrubber nanos and anti-virus program to the infected vehicles. Everyone with an infected vehicle was required to report it, and Mom had filled out the forms. A package came in the mail with the scrubber nanos in a spray can and a booklet on how to disinfect the car and then install the anti-virus. Mom set it on the kitchen window sill and it gathered dust.

By the end of summer, most of the infected vehicles were off the road. They'd either destroyed themselves or, in the case of the really aggressive ones, been hunted down and disabled. There were still incidents almost every day. Three fire trucks in San Francisco were scrambled for a five alarm fire, and instead they went on a wild rampage through the city. Someone deliberately infected fifteen Harley-Davidsons parked outside a bar with a variant of the virus, and ten of the Hells Angels who mounted them and rode away died a mile later. A fuel delivery business in Anchorage faced huge fines when it was determined that they had neglected to use the proper anti-virus. The fines for the environmental clean-up were even bigger.

In late September, during a heavy rainstorm, I spotted Old Paint near the school. He was idling at the curb, and I ran toward him, but Ben grabbed me by the shoulder. "He's infected. You can't trust him," he warned me in a harsh whisper. He looked over his shoulder, fearful that someone else might have overhead. By then, they were disabling even non-aggressive vehicles because they thought they might be able to infect other vehicles. As we walked toward the bus stop, Old Paint slowly edged down the street after us.

"Why is he here? He never did auto-pick-up for us."

"It's in his programming. He knows what school we go to, and what time we get out. Mom put it in just in case she wanted to use it someday. Probably just glitching."

When we got on the bus, Old Paint revved his engine, honked twice, and passed us. When Mom got home from work, we told her and she smiled. That night, really late, I heard her get out of bed and I followed her to the living room. We peeked out the rain-streaked window and Old Paint was charging himself at our parking slot.

"Doesn't look so bad for being on the road so long," Mom said. She smiled. "I bet I'll find a car wash and oil change on my credit card bill this month."

I went to the kitchen and came back with the scrubber and anti-virus. "Shall we try to catch him?" I asked.

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She pursed her lips and shook her head. "Not in the rain. Let him get used to coming at night to charge. On a dry night, I'll go down and spray him."

And we went back to bed.

September became October. I saw Old Paint in the streets sometimes and I suspect he came and charged up at our place more than once. But the weather stayed wet and that was Mom's excuse for not trying to catch him. Ben was playing football for his school and seemed so different it was like aliens had re-programmed my brother. Most days, I had to ride the bus alone. I noticed that Old Paint would show up at the school on the really stormy days and shadow me until I was on the bus. Once he was at my bus stop and followed me home. I knew I wasn't supposed to get inside him, but no one had said I couldn't talk to him. So I edged toward him as he followed the sidewalk and ran my fingers along his fender. "I miss you, Old Paint," I told him. The locks bit down, he revved his engine and leaped away from the curb. He tore off through the afternoon traffic with other cars honking at him. It really hurt my feelings. I didn't tell Mom or Ben. I was afraid she might report him as borderline aggressive and give his GPS code to the police.

January brought really nasty weather. Snow fell, melted into black ice, and more snow fell. For a solid week, the cycle repeated. The worst part was that all the busses were running on the "snow routes" that avoided hills. So our usual three block walk to the bus stop became six blocks to a main street. Each day, Old Paint was outside our apartments, edging along behind us as we walked to the bus stop. Ben ignored him, except to cuss that he could be inside a warm car instead of wading through snow and ice.

Our bus stop was right in front of a charging station. There was a line for the quick charge, and while we were waiting for the bus, a black van pulled up, blocking a car in. The lettering on the sign said Road Dog Recoveries. "Bounty hunters!" Ben said. "Cool. Watch this."

They fanned out around the car they wanted. A man in a car at the end of the line shouted, "Don't shoot those so close to the station!" Because they had their special tire piercing guns out and were taking aim at the red Beamer they had blocked in.

But that wasn't the car they should have been watching. Two cars back in line, a black sedan with big wheels suddenly cranked its wheels and cut right through the median and the bushes and right at us. It hit one of the men as it did so and he went flying. The other men all fired at it. And missed. Then the red car freaked out, backed into the car behind it to gain a bit of space, and it shot over the curb into the median and high centered.

Ben grabbed me and jerked me to one side, but it wasn't quite enough. I hadn't even seen the black sedan coming toward us. It clipped me and the impact snatched me out of Ben's grip. I went flying and rolling out into the street. When I hit the ground, I slid on the black ice and I thought I was never going to stop. Ben was yelling, cars were honking, and when I finally stopped the whole world was spinning. But I was okay. I got up. Ben was running toward me.

Then my arm started really hurting and I realized I couldn't move it. I screamed. And Ben shouted, "*Run! Run, Sadie, get out of there!*"

The black sedan had slewed around and was coming back at me. Later, I found out that it had belonged to a security service and had an attack mode if anyone tried to harm the VIP inside. It had interpreted the bounty hunters as assassins. No one could say why it came after me. But as it came at me and I turned to run, I saw something even scarier. Old Paint was roaring at me, full speed in reverse. I was going to be crushed between the two cars. I screamed, the black sedan hit me, and I was airborne.

But Old Paint's rear door had opened upward and as I flew toward him, he shifted

into first, burned rubber, and faded away from me like a catcher back-pedaling for a fly ball. I landed in the rear-facing back seat as air bags blossomed. It wasn't exactly a soft landing, but his actions meant that it was the softest possible landing. I collapsed there as the hatch was closing, and then I fainted as his air bags puffed up all around me.

I woke up on the way to the emergency room. I couldn't see anything because I was surrounded by air bags. I heard Ben shouting my name and then he was pushing the bags back. He was in the middle seat, leaning over the back, trying to reach me. "Who's driving?" I asked, but he only shouted, "Are you okay? Are you okay?"

Old Paint ignored traffic signals and one way signs all the way to the hospital. Horns blaring and recorded voice shouting, "Emergency! Emergency! Out of the way, please! Emergency!" he beat out an ambulance and was opening the back hatch as he backed up to the emergency room loading dock. Ben jumped out, screaming for someone to help his sister. The air bags around me deflated and people in white lifted me out. I had one glimpse of Old Paint as he roared away from the ramp. His rear bumper was pushed in and his back window was crazed.

"What happened to Old Paint?" I cried. They had me on a gurney and were rolling me in. Ben trotted beside me, his cell phone to his ear.

"Compared to that black sedan? Nothing. He worked that car over until it couldn't even turn a wheel. Slammed into it over and over. I thought you were going to be creamed in there. Mom?" Ben talked into his phone. "Mom, yeah, we're at Mary Bridge Children's hospital. Sadie got hit by a car, but Old Paint saved her. Come fast, they want our insurance number and I don't know it."

I wasn't hurt that bad. My arm was broken and I was bruised all over. They kept me six hours for observation, but my concussion was mild. Mom stayed by my bed. Two cops came to ask what happened. Ben said a crazy car had hit me. Mom said she had no idea what good Samaritan had picked me up and gotten me to the hospital, but she thanked them. The policewoman said that the other witnesses had said the car had behaved in an extraordinary manner to save me. Ben looked at Mom and said, "Some old dude was driving it. After he busted up that black car, he opened the door and yelled at me to jump in. He said he drove in stock car races, demolition derbies when he was a kid. Then he brought us here. He left because he didn't want to get in trouble."

The cops asked him some more questions, but Ben just kept saying, "I don't remember" or "I didn't see, I was worried about my sister." After they finally left, my mom said very quietly, "I hope the charging station didn't catch the plates on camera."

Ben just looked at her. "Yeah. Me, too," he said. "But I couldn't let them go out and disable him after he saved Sadie's life."

Mom took a deep breath. "Ben. Sadie. We both know it's probably going to come down to that, eventually. He can't run wild forever. And we all know that Old Paint is just following the directives of his programming. He's not really . . . alive. He seems that way because we think of him that way. But it's all just programming."

"Saving Sadie's life? Catching her in the back seat like that, cushioning her with air bags while he pounded that sedan into scrap?" Ben laughed and shook his head. "You won't convince me of that, Mom."

The hospital let me go home that evening. We all went to bed right away. But about midnight, I heard my mom get up, so I did, too. She was looking out through the blinds at our parking stall.

"Is he there? Is he okay?"

"No, baby, he's not here. Go back to bed."

Ben and I overslept the next morning and didn't go to school. Mom hadn't bothered waking us. We had a good six inches of snow outside, and school was cancelled for the day. When we came out to the living room, Mom was sitting at the computer

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watching a dot on a map. It wasn't moving. There was a backpack at her feet and a heap of winter clothes beside her.

"You kids get your homework off Moodle," she said. "I'm going to be gone for a while." She sounded funny.

"No," Ben said. "We're going with you."

We hiked through the snow to a bus stop and took a bus to a City Car rental lot and checked out a tiny car. Riding in it after riding in Old Paint was like crowding into a shower stall together. Mom sat in the single front seat and Ben and I had the back seat. There was barely room for us with our coats on. Mom plugged in the coordinates, and the car demanded that she scan her credit card again. It had a prissy girl's voice. "MacIntosh Lake is outside of Zones 1 through 12. Additional fees will apply," the car told her.

She thumbed for them. The car didn't move. "Hazardous conditions are reported. Cancellation recommended. You will not be charged if you terminate this transaction now."

Mom sighed. "Just go," she said, and we went. It wasn't too bad. The main roads had been plowed and salted, and once we got on I-5, the plows and the other traffic had cleared most of the mess down to almost pavement. It felt really odd not to have Old Paint's bulk around me, and I leaned against Ben.

We didn't talk much as the car hummed along. Ben had tossed a bunch of stuff in his backpack, including my pain medicine and a water bottle. I took a pill and slept most of the way. I woke up to Ben saying, "But there's a chain across the access road."

"So we'll get out here," Mom said.

I sat up. We were out in the country, and the only tracks on the snowy road behind us were ours. It was a very strange feeling. All I could see was wind-smoothed white snow and snow-laden trees on either side of the narrow road. We had pulled off the road into a driveway and stopped. There were two big yellow posts in front of us, with a heavy chain hung between them. A hunter-orange sign said, "CLOSED." The road in front of us was mostly smooth snow and it wound out of sight into the woods.

Mom told the car to wait and it obediently shut down. We struggled back into our coats. None of us had real snow boots. Mom grabbed her pack and Ben brought his as we stepped out into smooth snow. The skies had cleared and it was cold. This snow wouldn't melt any time soon. Ben followed Mom and she followed the ghost tire tracks that left the road and went around the access gate to the lake. Snow had almost filled them and the wind was polishing them away. I came last, stepping in their footprints. Mom pulled her coat tighter as we walked and said, "There were some great raves out here when I was in high school. But in summer."

"What would you do to me if I went to a rave out in the woods?" Ben asked.

Mom just looked at him. We both knew he'd been to raves out in the woods. Ben shut up.

Mom saw Old Paint before we did, and she broke into a run. Old Paint was shut down, back under the trees. Snow was mounded over him; only the funky paint job on his sides showed. Twigs and leaves had fallen on his snowy roof during the night. His windows were thick with frost. He looked to me like he'd been there for years. As we got closer, his engine ticked twice and then went silent. Mom halted and flung out her arms. "Stay back, kids," she warned us. Then she went forward alone.

She talked to him in a low voice as she walked slowly around the car. She kept shaking her head. Ben and I ignored what she'd said and walked slowly forward. Old Paint was still. Both his front and back bumpers were pushed in and he had a long crease down his passenger side. One of his headlights was cracked. His rear license plate hung by a single screw. "He's dead," I said, and I felt my eyes start to sting.

"Not quite," my mom said grimly. "He doesn't have enough of a charge to move. His

nanos have been trying to pop his dents out and fix his glass, but that will take time." She went around to the driver door and unlocked it with a key. She leaned in and popped the hood, and then tossed the keys to Ben. "Look in the back. There's a hatch in the floor. Open it. Get out the stuff in there. Looks like we're going to need Grandpa's emergency kit."

She dropped her pack on the ground in the snow and then wrestled a Charge-In-A-Box out of it. Ben and I were staring at her. "Hurry up!" she snapped.

We walked to the back of the car. Mom already had the cables out and she plugged Old Paint in. His horn tooted faintly. "Easy, big fella," my brother said as he slid the key into the lock. He saw me looking at him and said, "Just shut up."

We pushed the deflated air bags out of the way. We found the floor hatch and opened it. "Look at all this stuff!" my brother exclaimed. My mom walked back and looked in. She had a grim smile as she said, "My grandpa was always trying to keep me safe. He tried to think of everything to protect me. 'Plan for the worst and hope for the best,' he always said." She took a deep breath and then sighed it out. "So. Let's get to work."

Ben and I more watched than worked. It was weird to watch her fix Old Paint. She was so calm. She pulled his dipstick, wiped it on her jeans, studied it, and then added something out of a can. Then she pulled another dipstick, checked it, and nodded. She checked wires and some she tightened. She replaced two fuses. She looked inside his radiator and then felt around under it. "No leaks!" she said. "That's a miracle." She stepped back and shut the hood.

Old Paint woke up. His engine turned over and then quit. Turned over again, ran a bit rough and then smoothed out. He sounded hoarse to me as he said, "Right front tire is flat. Do not attempt to move the vehicle."

"There's Fix A Flat in there," Ben said, and Mom said, "Get it."

He came back with it and his backpack. I stood next to him, stroking Old Paint's fender and saying, "It's going to be okay, Old Paint. It's going to be okay." Neither one of them made fun of me. While I was standing there, his front bumper suddenly popped out into position. You can't really see nanos working to take out a dent, but he already looked less battered than he had. Ben handed Mom the can and she re-inflated the tire.

"Tire pressure is corrected," Old Paint announced.

Then Ben took the scrubber spray and anti-virus box out of the pack and handed it to her without a word.

Mom took it and stood up slowly. She walked slowly to the back of the car and I followed her. She put away the leftover emergency supplies. She gently shut the door. The glass nanos were at work on the rear window. It was almost clear again. She walked around the car and Ben and I both followed her. She got to the driver's door, opened it and climbed in.

"Mom?" Ben asked her anxiously and she waved a hand at him. "I just want to check something," she said.

She opened a little panel on his dash and a small screen lit up. She touched it lightly, scrolling down it. Then she stopped and leaned her forehead on the steering wheel for a minute. When she spoke, her voice was choked and muffled by her arms.

"My grandpa considered himself something of a hacker, in an old school way. He made some modifications to Old Paint. That's Grandpa's voice you hear, when Old Paint speaks. And you know how I told you some people remove the safety constraints from the car's programming, the 'do no harm to people' or bypass the speed constraints? Not my grandpa." She sat up and pointed at the screen. "See all those red 'override' indicators? You're not supposed to be able to do that. But Grandpa did. He gave Old Paint one ultimate command: 'Protect logged users of vehicle.'"

She flipped the little panel closed over the screen and spoke quietly. "I should have known. I was a wild kid. Drinking. Doping. So he broke into the software and overrode everything to make 'protect the child' the car's highest priority. Hm." She made a husky noise in her throat. "Got me out of a corner more times than I like to think about. I passed out more than once behind the wheel, but somehow I always got home safe." She dashed tears from her eyes and then looked at us with a crooked smile. "Just programming, kids. That's all. Just his programming. Despite all his tough talk, it was just his programming to protect, as best he could. No matter what."

Ben was as puzzled as I was. "The car? Or Grandpa?"

She sniffed again but didn't answer. She reopened the panel on his dash and accessed his GPS. She was talking softly. "You remember that one spring break, my senior year? Arizona. And that boy named Mark. Sun, sun, and more sun. We hardly ever had to stop at a charging station. That's where you should go, old friend. And drive safely."

"Don't we always?" he asked her.

She laughed out loud.

She got out and shut the door. He revved his engine a few times, and then began to pull forward. We stepped back out of his way, and he moved slowly past us, the deep snow squeaking under his tires. Mom stepped forward, brushing snow, twigs, and leaves off the solars on his roof. He stopped and let her clear them. Then, "All done. Run free," she told him, and patted his rear view mirror.

When she stepped back, he revved his engine, tooted his horn twice, and peeled out in a shower of snow. We stood there and watched him go. Mom didn't move until we couldn't hear him anymore. Then she pitched the packet of anti-virus as far as she could into the woods. "There are some things that just don't need curing," she said.

We went back to the City Rents car and climbed in. My sneakers were soaked, my feet were numb, and my jeans were wet halfway to my knees. We ate some peanut butter sandwiches that Ben had packed, Mom gave me another pain pill, and I slept all the way home.

Three nights later, I got out of bed and padded toward the living room in my pajamas. I peeked around the corner. My mom's chair was rocked back as far as it would go and her toes were up on the edge of the desk. The bluish monitor light was the only light in the room. She was watching a moving dot on a map, and smiling. She had headphones on and was nodding her head to music we could barely hear. Oldies. I jumped when Ben put his hand on my shoulder and gently pulled me back into the hallway. He shook his head at me and I nodded. We both went back to bed.

I never saw Old Paint again. He stayed in Arizona, mostly charging off the sun and not moving around much once he was there. Once in a while, I'd get home from school and turn on the computer and check on him. He was just a red dot moving on thin lines in a faraway place, or, much more often, a black dot on an empty spot on the map. After a while, I stopped thinking about him.

Ben did two years of community college and then got a "Potential" scholarship to a college in Utah. It was hard to say goodbye to him, but by then I was in high school and had a life of my own. It was my turn to have spats with Mom.

One April day, I came home to find that Mom had left the computer running. There had been an email from Ben, with an attachment, and she had left it as a screen saver. He'd gone to Arizona for spring break. "This was as close as I could get to him," Ben had written. The scene had been shot under a bright blue sky, with red cliffs in the distance. There was nothing there, only scrub brush and a dirt road. And in the distance, a station wagon moved steadily away, a long plume of dust hanging in the still air behind him. ○

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THE GIRL IN THE PARK

Robert Reed

Inspiration for Robert Reed's latest tale came from one of his own treks through a park. "I was walking a husky dog, not pushing a stroller. But the girl was everything that the girl in my story is—young and pretty and profoundly lost. I did my best to steer her toward the distant address, cursing myself in the process. I watched the headlines for a week or two. No teenagers went missing or ended up in shallow graves. But I have carried a small, manageable guilt with me all of these years." We don't know if Bob's conscience has been salved by his imaginative rumination on this experience, but at least we get to read an intriguing story.

“I didn’t sleep last night,” my father says.
“That’s too bad,” I say.
He isn’t looking at me. An empty piece of wall needs watching, blue eyes alive inside the puffy face. “I normally sleep fine,” he says.
“I know you do.”
“But I had this dream. All of a sudden, I’m awake. I’m remembering.”
I nod and wait.
He looks at me, just for a moment. Just to make sure I’m paying attention. “Has she gone?”
Mom, he means. “She isn’t here, Dad.”
“That’s right. It’s Saturday.”
A lot of days are Saturday.
“Off to see her girlfriends,” he says fondly.
Mom died six years ago.
Looking back at the wall, he laughs. The sound just misses being happy; nervous energy fills the room. “Speaking about girls,” he says. “A pretty one woke me up last night.”
“Really,” I say.
“Don’t tell your mother.”
“I won’t.”
“It’s funny about dreams. I haven’t thought about the girl in years.”
I wait.
“Want to know who she was?”
“Who was she?”

"I don't know." And then he laughs again.

There isn't a better long-term care facility in the state. His room is a climate-controlled palace, clean water whenever he wants, the food good enough to put weight on his bones. There aren't any windows, but the filtered air is fresh and every wall is covered with squidskin. The skin can project any image or program, or if desired, real-time vistas. But too much novelty makes the patient unmanageable. That's why my father and his doctors insist on keeping these walls a serene, heavenly white.

When the laughter fades, I say, "So what about this girl?"

"In my dream or real life?"

"Life."

He nods and squints, eyes conjuring. "This was a long time ago. You weren't even two. An old-fashioned summer evening, warm but not brutal. I had you in the stroller, taking you out for air. I don't remember where Mom was, but she wasn't with us. It was a boys' night out."

The ageless joke.

"We were in the park, heading south on the path. I didn't see her at first. But then you pointed and said, 'Girl,' and I looked up to find this pretty gal walking toward us. I couldn't tell where she came from. In her early teens, I guessed. Or she was older but small and young looking for her age. Know what I mean?"

"Sure, Dad."

"A little darling with long black hair. Vietnamese, maybe. Probably. We had a lot of them in town, after the Chinese ate their country."

"She was pretty."

"Yeah, but don't get me wrong. She was just a kid." He looks at the floor, his mouth twisting. Fifty years later, and the possibility of inappropriate lust embarrasses him. "The girl saw me, saw us. I was this happy young husband pushing my boy, so maybe I looked safe. Or maybe she was desperate for help and ready to take a chance on me. I don't know."

This is a good moment to nod, smiling patiently.

"The girl called me, 'Sir.' She asked if I would help her." He squints hard, looking at his empty hands. "She had this piece of paper. There was an address on it, numbers and a street. The place she wanted was east of us, and north. We were nowhere near where she wanted to be."

I say nothing.

"Is it still there?"

"The park is, but not the trail. It's all gardens now."

He pauses, breathing to clear away muddled thoughts. "You've got to understand. I was worried, and it wasn't just because she was young and lost. That girl was wearing these high, high heels and this little wisp of a dress. She had makeup on, and jewelry. I remember a gold necklace and rings."

"You remember a lot, Dad."

He hears a compliment and chuckles. "She knew English, but it sounded like a second language. She called me, 'Sir,' and asked for my help and handed me that piece of paper. You flirted with her, making your happy noises, and I studied the address. That's what I was trying to remember last night. That address."

"Sure."

"After I woke up, I just laid in bed, trying not to wake your mother. She's not a hard sleeper like me. Like you. You used to sleep good. Do you still?"

"What happened next, Dad?"

He blinks, and that hard laugh returns, always familiar, always grating. The only sound in the world is my father's weird pleasure. "She was balanced on those tall shoes, wearing sexy clothes, underage, and hunting for a door that was a mile and

half from us. And there was no telling how far she'd stumbled along before she came across me and you."

I nod. "You were worried."

"Yeah, I knew the street she wanted. I had a pretty good idea where she was going. But before I helped, I asked, 'Where is your car?'

"Then her smile changed. She said, 'I'm walking.'

"Not in those shoes,' I said.

"I could tell, my attitude made her nervous. She wasn't smiling anymore. One little foot picked up and set down again, a little farther away from me. The girl wanted her precious address back, but she was afraid to get too close. All of a sudden, I was scary.

"So why are you making this hike?" I asked.

"To visit a friend," she said, so it had to be a guy. Either he was as young as her and couldn't drive, or he was a fat lot older. But I figured she wouldn't dress up like a party girl if she was visiting a goofball kid from middle school. No, she put herself in front of a mirror to look sexy. Worldly. Fun. So I knew her boyfriend didn't come to her house because he was twenty-seven, something like that, and the girl's folks would have called the police. Or shot him themselves. That's how the Vietnamese were."

"What next, Dad?"

A satisfied smile breaks out. "This was a big moment for your old man. You don't know that, do you? Of course I didn't realize it right away either. But that was the first time that I ever felt like a genuine adult. Like a real father. I was a mature respectable man, and she was such a sweet pretty thing. Too young for any boyfriend, regardless what those clothes were shouting. And looking at her, I got this huge urge to act like every father, giving advice, dishing out threats. Do whatever it took to make the girl sensible, to keep her safe."

He pauses, both of us waiting for his voice to return.

"Only I didn't ask more questions," he says sadly. "And I didn't threaten to call her parents. In the end, I decided she wasn't my responsibility. I pointed her in the right direction and reminded her that she had a long way to go. Then I handed back the address and wished her a good night, and she thanked me politely and walked away. You and I watched that kid riding those ridiculous shoes, going down the path. And now it is years later, and I'm awake in the middle of the night, feeling guilty about doing nothing to help her."

My father has no clear idea how many years have passed.

"And here you are," he says.

I say nothing, watching one of his white walls.

"Guess what I want," he says.

"To be young again."

"That too. That too."

I laugh with him before asking, "What do you want, Dad?"

A shy smile builds. "In my dream, she looked the same. The same little dress, same pretty face. Except she was holding her shoes in one hand and her feet were blistered by the straps. Maybe that's why she was crying. Maybe something worse made her sad. I really don't know. But the girl was sobbing, begging me for help. 'Please, please, find out where I went,' she said. 'Please find out what happened to me.'"

I show him a fine little smile.

"But I can't find anybody by myself," he says.

"Not today," I say.

"And my son is a very important fellow," he says.

This is the one part that I halfway enjoy. Tedious as the rest of it can be, I relish the moment when he talks proudly about his only child.

"You're the mayor," he says.

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I was the interim mayor for a six-month appointment. I don't hold the office anymore, except in his mind, where I stand like an emperor of our little city.

"There must be records," he says. "And you have the police to help. How many fourteen-year-old Vietnamese girls lived in town back then?"

"Not many," I say.

"Today's Saturday," he says. "First thing Monday, maybe you could get the wheels of government turning."

Today is Tuesday, and this visit has gone on long enough. I stand, ready to offer my routine promise to look into the matter. But the old fellow has one more bit of news to offer. "I was awake all night, listening to your mom snoring," he says. "I laid there thinking, and all of a sudden it comes to me."

"What's that, Dad?"

"The address. Just as I read it twenty years ago. Fifty years ago. Whenever it was. I remembered that and everything else all over again. And god, were you ever one cute little boy."

Lost girls weren't discussed while I was growing up. But I wouldn't have noticed if they were. I was a typical cute little boy, stubbornly oblivious to anything that wasn't football or his Xbox. Some of my teachers claimed everything was hotter, but I didn't care. We had air conditioning. Distant governments were falling, but my patch of real estate was nothing but boring. And then I turned thirteen, and my eyes got a little bigger. Drought and a worldwide panic had put the economy into the dumpster, which was kind of important. And then my father lost his job, which was serious shit. He was home all day, every day, and we didn't have an extra dime. One day, our gutters needed to be fixed. It happened to be Saturday. Mom was off with her friends. Dad wanted me to help. But I had an important game to watch, so I gave him a couple lame excuses and promised to come out at halftime, and he went outside and up a ladder to work on the gutter that had pulled away from the soffit. We had a tall two-story house. He took a hammer with him but forgot the silicone, and he left the hammer hooked on a rung or on the gutter, and he climbed back down and bumped the ladder. We think. And then the hammer dropped, striking my father on his bare balding head.

I heard a bump outside, and then Dad came through the front door calling for Mom. But she was gone, and why didn't he know that? I came out from the den to find him stunned but stubborn. He said he made a little mistake. He said that he didn't feel too good. Sitting on the sofa, he asked for a towel to fight the bleeding, which was bad but not awful, and while I was off doing that chore, he decided that what he needed was a nap. A few seconds later, he was nearly sleeping. I called Mom because of the blood on the upholstery. I was thirteen, which is to say that I was a kid, and my life experience was a miserable proving ground for solid, commonsensical thinking. Mom listened to the first two sentences of what was going to be a longer story full of excuses. Then she interrupted, telling me that what I needed to do was hang up and call 911 and tell them to hurry, and before I was off the phone, I should try to wake Dad up. And if words didn't work, I should slap him. Hard.

I was a child, and then I wasn't. By nightfall, I was this guilt-ravaged young man, and our tall house was on its way to becoming the property of creditors. I wasn't to blame for anything. Mom made a point of saying that. At her insistence, the doctors explained that I helped save the man's life. But I could have been outside helping him, and I wasn't, and he suffered mightily because I might have done something smart or kept him from doing something stupid, or at least I would have seen that hammer falling and heroically pushed him out of the way, taking the blow instead of him.

Cranial bleeding and pressure meant surgery, and there was rehabilitation after

his life was saved. But that year of setbacks and few successes left a man I didn't know. Mom tried caring for him but couldn't. She and I moved into an apartment, and he went into a facility that wasn't too awful, and at least one of us visited him every day. Mom, mostly. Meanwhile, my guilt broadened and grew deeper. My father was different and peculiar, with this perfect memory for things from twenty years ago but unsure about last week. I couldn't much like him, and that made me sick. If the man didn't remember me visiting on his birthday, why should I bust my ass to come sit in the same chair again, replaying the same conversations, enduring the same jokes, putting on smiles when all I wanted was to cry?

I was eighteen and in college when he first admitted to me that he couldn't sleep last night. Mom wasn't there. I was solo. Dad told me about an odd dream and some nameless girl in the park, and he was worried about her. In the dream, she wanted to be found, and maybe I could help solve this mystery.

I called Mom right away. But the story was old business. She said he had that dream about once a month, and maybe it was based on something real. But it could just as well be a fantasy, and my strong impression was that the stoic wife didn't want to dwell too much on what might well have triggered this interest: The brain-damaged goat feeling a little too interested in a pretty girl dressed for fun.

Four more years passed. By then I was in law school. My goal was a career that would evade being a lawyer. But it was a big confusing time, and making long-term plans seemed crazy. That was the awful endless decade where even the most ignorant citizen understood what it meant when methane was fizzing out of Siberia. Glaciers were crumbling, and the Amazon was burning, and ten different geoengineering schemes were doing nothing but eating billions of dollars while dirtying up our hot, unpalatable atmosphere.

One day, Dad told both of us, "I couldn't sleep last night."

Mom didn't look up from her knitting. "That's too bad, honey."

"I don't know where you were," he complained. "You must have been sleeping in the guest bed."

"Because I was snoring," she said. "I was afraid I'd wake you."

"I don't wake up. Not normally." Then he looked at the most interested face in the room. "You won't remember this girl. You were too young."

Mom said, "Tell him anyway, hon."

"I will," he said. And he did.

Maybe his wife didn't care about the mystery girl, but his son was curious, at least enough to beg for details and remember the useful bits, thinking about the puzzle. Then I woke up early, the answer dancing before me.

I knew which summer and the girl's approximate age, but just to be sure, I picked a three-year window and various nationalities, placing her age between an obscene twelve and legal-for-anything eighteen. Public high schools and middle schools left a lot of candidates, and that's before I threw in the Catholics and the Lutherans, and just to be thorough, the virtuous Seventh-Day Adventists. Eighty-three faces were scanned and cleaned up digitally. Then I picked a day when I could visit him alone, and after a lot of empty chatter about weather and how much he hated certain dead presidents, I unrolled my squidskin and gave him the full show.

The girls confused him.

Halfway through the adventure, there was nothing to see but my own foolishness. He didn't know any of the girls, and he had no clue why he would. "No, no, no," he kept saying. Except when he would linger on one face, thinking hard before saying, "I don't know. Maybe."

His "maybes" never looked like each other, at least to my eye.

Sixty-seven pictures into the slideshow, I was looking for any excuse to quit. But

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Dad stopped me, grabbing my forearm, saying, "Yeah, I know her. I remember her. How do I know her? Why is she familiar?"

"We saw her in the park one night," I said. And I told him the year and the circumstances, and he nodded as if he knew it all.

Except in the end, he just shook his head. "You've got a better memory than me, for sure. And what were you? Two years old?"

Bret asks, "How's your father?"

"Sleepless," I say.

She smiles, just a little. "Sorry."

I sit beside her on the bench, sharing the March shade. This is a little downtown park. The Roman genius for gardens makes every corner feel private, every bench feel special. But this is lunchtime, and people are circulating, looking for prime real estate. Coming past, they see her militia uniform and maybe they see me, and easy smiles sometimes lead to little winks before they move on.

"You're a good son," says Bret.

"The best he'll ever know," I say.

She has her lunch started. I attack mine.

"I like your father," she says.

"Good."

"He's a charmer," she says. "And I think he's sharper than we realize."

"We" means "me," but I ignore the implications.

"When he talks about the girl," she begins.

"What?"

She gets cautious. "We haven't talked about her. Not in a long time."

"I guess we haven't."

"Do you ever tell him what you know?"

"Parts of it."

"How about everything?"

"Nobody knows everything," I say.

Bret has a sandwich dressed around a single tissue-thin slice of genuine ham. I smell cured meat and mayonnaise. She bites and looks at me, and smiling says, "Do you want some of this?"

"Some of what?"

She laughs and puts the sandwich down. "So you tell him something about the girl, but he doesn't remember the next time. Is that about it?"

"Pretty much."

She waits.

"Except that he knows the address now."

"You found it."

"But he thinks he pulled it out of his own head. And maybe that's what he is doing. I'm the confused one, thinking I taught it to him."

She laughs and bites. "And the boyfriend?"

"The man was twenty-seven. But Dad thinks that's a guess."

"How old was your father? When he saw the girl, I mean."

"Thirty."

Bret is a tough soldier who excelled as an MP. Neither of us are crime investigators, but our jobs have rubbed up against the worst cases and the worst kinds of people.

"I like your father," she says again.

"I do too."

"So," she says, picking up the ham sandwich again. "Why not tell him everything about the girl in the park? Just to see what would happen."

"That's a very big story," I say.

"He might find it interesting."

"Yeah, well," I say. "I don't care how brain-damaged the man is. Not for one minute would that man believe me."

I had a face for the girl, and a name, but I still didn't know the address or why she would want to walk miles to get there. Later yearbooks and the city registers didn't show any sign of the girl. I tried Googling her, but twenty years and two cyberwars didn't leave me any worthwhile trails. One night was invested doing nothing but reading old news stories until I was an expert on local rapes and violent murders, but I should have been reading property law and paid for that the next day. So I dropped that topic for another six months.

And then my father brought it up again.

"I had a bad dream, son. This girl, this poor kid . . . I think she was getting herself in trouble. Would you help me find her, please?"

Law students have to intern with law firms. The most influential firm in the city refused my services, but the second best took a chance. Its bottom-rung attorneys would listen to what I had to say, if I was loud enough, and they were always happy to inform me that I was wasting the world's time. But one of them happened to mention that the youngest partner used to work in the prosecutor's office, and he knew everybody of consequence, and maybe he could convince me that there was nothing to find.

I introduced myself to the ex-prosecutor and mentioned having a few questions.

He asked me to sit, but I wanted to show him the yearbook picture first. He took a long look at the squidskin, nothing showing in his face. Then he pushed the skin back to me and once again said, "Sit."

I settled, and he started to talk.

The world was a mess, and it would doubtlessly get worse, and before doing anything else, the prosecutor wanted me to understand why that was. For ten minutes, he listed the usual suspects: Too many people on too little ground, too few resources and a climate careening out of control, plus every species of war and political mayhem. But he didn't believe any of those explanations. From a simple country lawyer's point of view, the central problem was the Law and how it was unfairly applied to a world that needed justice and honor as surely as it needed food and breath. Honest courts and moral legal minds could erase much of the world's hurt, and he didn't mind if people laughed at a middle-aged fool for saying such sentimental nonsense. He felt it. He believed it. And he didn't give a shit what cynics and other mentally suspect idiots said about him.

I laughed quietly, nervously.

He leaned forward. "Our chaos is only going to grow wilder and more unpredictable," he said.

On that note, his office fell silent. And needing noise, I said, "Okay," while I rolled up my squidskin. "Thank you, sir. Thank you."

"Tell me what you know," the ex-prosecutor said.

"Know?"

"About the girl."

"Okay," I repeated. Then I explained the situation to my satisfaction, which prompted a series of questions that defined my ignorance.

"Let me see her again," he said.

But he watched me, not the image. Then with a quiet dry voice, he told me that eighteen months after my father saw a girl in the park, a local man was arrested. From memory, he offered a name and how many girls the man was accused of raping and how many more victims were never mentioned at trial. The defendant's methods involved high-end fake jewelry and drugs and praise and more praise. He preferred thir-

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teen- and fourteen-year-old girls, three at a time, and he would sit with his legs crossed on his bed while the lucky beauties got to fight over the honor of servicing him.

"Shit," I said.

"Shit is right," he said.

From memory, he told me the address. He knew it because he worked the case and interviewed several victims, and he visited the apartment just to have a better picture what must have transpired. Then he finally looked at the girl's smiling, middle-school face. "The files are sealed," he said. "I won't discuss minors, and it would be improper to ask me about these crimes."

"I would never ask," I told him.

"Good," he said, not believing my lie.

"And I don't plan to tell my father any of this," I said. "It would make him sick, thinking about what he didn't do."

The attorney was in his middle forties, which at the time seemed old and possibly wise. A smile was offered, meant to reassure me of something or other. Then he leaned back slowly, saying, "It gets worse."

"Worse?"

"The rapist was sick. In the Army, he picked up the weaponized HIV. There weren't any treatments then, much less a cure. Your average lifespan was about seven years, and a lot of that miserable."

Worse stories filled the news every morning. But that news hurt.

"Eighty percent of his victims were infected," he said.

I nodded weakly.

"The son of a bitch was sentenced to three hundred years and died in four, and he's buried on the hill above the state penitentiary."

I looked at the girl's inverted face.

He rerolled the skin and handed it back to me. "Let me tell you about another case," he said. "The Arizona-Vietnamese War. Remember that?"

"When I was four," I said. "I don't remember it."

"Two refugee communities went to war," he said. "Ten gang members killed in a week, plus three innocents in the bus fire. It was the worst crime in the city's history, at least until the Equinox Riot. The police needed witnesses who would testify. There weren't any to find. But there was an attorney in the prosecutor's office who knew certain people. I won't give you specifics. But he was friendly with one family, and they trusted him for some crazy reason, and there was a sixteen-year-old daughter who had dropped out of school. She was instrumental at the trial. Justice managed one good day. And for her cooperation, she and her family were given a new home and fresh names, and I honestly don't know where she went or what's happened to her. But I suspect they put her close to a good hospital, since the poor kid had some terrible health problems."

I nodded and stood.

The man rose and shook my hand for the first time, saying, "Maybe we'll talk again, son. About happier topics, hopefully."

"I hope so, sir."

Fifteen years later, the ex-prosecutor and prominent attorney became the city's newest mayor, and after an exhaustive search, the thankless job of serving as his deputy was offered to me.

"Where's your mother?"

"Where do you think she is, Dad?"

"I don't know. What day is it?"

Watching him, I say, "Friday."

"Is Mom at work?"

I don't answer.

"God, at her age, and they're making her work. I know she loves that office, but Jesus, she deserves a break. Don't you think?"

I'm wondering which way this will fall.

Then his face changes, and he says, "Wait. Is your mother dead?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Oh, I knew that." What is eerie is the supreme, giddy pleasure that comes over him. He knows something important, and maybe he isn't a fool. The revelation leaves no room for grief or despair. He smiles and licks his lips before looking at me. "How long has she been dead?"

"Six years."

"I almost knew that," he says.

I start to stand.

"By the way," he says. "How are you doing as mayor?"

"Great, Dad."

"Yeah, I knew that already. I just like to ask."

Our morning's big problem involved public parks and garden allotments. By law, every city household is given an equal plot, and on that ground a person can grow vegetables or marijuana or fruit trees—whatever he or she wants to use to help stave off famine and misery. But no two patches of soil are ever equal. A certain councilman had tweaked the system, accepting tomatoes and pot for fertile rectangles with easy access to the best gray water lines. That certain councilman was invited to the mayor's office on other business, but as soon as he got comfortable enough to lose his guard, the one-time prosecutor started hammering him with questions, with evidence, and finally, when the battle was won, a string of requests delivered with a cold, keen voice.

The councilman didn't run out of the room, but he wanted to.

Next on the agenda was the morning security briefing. The militia commander and our chief of police were waiting outside the mayor's office. I came out on my way to the bathroom. Bret said something about the councilman's expression, and the chief was enjoying a fine laugh.

I asked about the agenda. "Anything wearing red?"

The chief had a couple local thorns. But the year had been relatively quiet, all things considered. Bret had the usual alerts playing across her squidskin, but for months she had been singling out one of the threats.

"FlameHeads," she said.

"Back in five," I said, stepping into the hallway.

FlameHeads were smaller than small fruit flies. Like flies, they had wings and tongues and very durable brains. They weren't supposed to be used, ever. They were the new plutonium, the new Phoenix virus—measures of last resort. The Brazilian military designed them and ten other nations had copied them. FlameHeads were grown by the trillions, and still asleep, thrown into deep bunkers. And like nukes and plagues, they never would have seen sunlight. But the African League's stockpile was compromised last year. Every public official with clearance knew the broad details: Thousands or millions of FlameHeads were missing. The true number wasn't known. Officially, the weapons were full of anti-tampering wetware, but they were also ten years and three generations old. They were also designed to be launched by hypersonic planes soaring in the high stratosphere, but what had Bret really scared were rumors about high-altitude balloons carrying cargo other than sulfur dioxide and nano-mirrors. Injected above the weather, those flecks of insanity could remain

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airborne for months, waiting for a preprogrammed moment when they would tuck their wings and fall gently toward the helpless earth.

Five days ago, one of our local boys had been dumped by his girlfriend. Angry and alone, he gave off a stew of pheromones that were noticed by one pinhead-sized machine. Landing on the boy's neck and burrowing in deep, the FlameHead became a new gland pumping him full of powerful agents and subtle ones, too. Every day, the boy grew angrier. His solitude was unbearable. Deep instincts for fairness were triggered. A primate sense of pecking order defined the targets, and in a world full of injustice and vicious rulers, he was transformed into an angel of retribution.

I was in a bathroom when the gunfight began, and the wisest man I ever knew was killed. The police chief and two other officers were dead too, and I heard shouting and put my head out the door to find Bret and the boy on the marble floor, her on top of him. She had shattered the arm holding the weapon. Except pain only makes a FlameHead more focused. The boy dragged the limp arm into a fresh position and emptied the twin clips, and one bullet hurried past my head, killing the City Council president.

By noon, every northern nation was reeling from political assassinations. The US president survived a sniper's rail-gun, but then an infected agent in his security detail decided to finish the necessary job. By evening, martial law was imposed everywhere, and I had been mayor for six grueling hours. Bret came into my new office with word that our local boy just died of aneurysm. Then she briefed my staff and me about the latest news and what we might expect in the coming days and weeks.

Around midnight, it was just the two of us, and we were out of words.

If a third of the city went mad, everybody was dead. That was the inescapable truth.

She sat back at one end of the mayor's leather couch, and I sat at the other. It was the only time I ever saw her cry, and I cried along until I started to laugh.

"What's funny?" she said.

"Absolutely nothing," I said.

Then she was laughing with me.

"I'm thinking about my father," I said. "He's sitting in his room now, thinking about the same old, same old."

"You envy him, don't you?"

"For a lot of reasons," I said. "This is just one more."

"I didn't sleep last night."

I wait.

"Did you hear me?"

"You dreamed about that girl in the park again."

He looks at me. "Have I told you about her?"

"Once or twice."

Dad isn't pleased. A wary little smile shows itself and then vanishes. "Where's your mother?"

"She's gone."

He sighs.

"It's Saturday, Dad."

"I know that."

"And I'm going to try something. This once."

He stares at his favorite white wall, uncertain what to think.

"Phuong," I say.

The squidskin on his wall comes alive. Smiling gamely at the camera, the girl in the yearbook photo doesn't look innocent, not to me, but there is an endearing nervousness, a self-consciousness that matches well with her prettiness. Every old man

capable of certain thoughts would look at this fourteen-year-old and think, "Yes."

Dad turns to me. "You found her."

I nod.

He leans forward, steeling himself. "Do you know where she was going?"

I tell him exactly where she was going.

"So I was right," he says, nothing in the voice pleased.

Then I mention the criminal's name, and a larger patch of the squidskin gains color and motion. Newscasts from another age talk about the arrest and trial of a notorious child molester. Then the molester's death notice morphs into a medical file, the salient points made bold and honest. My father doesn't remember yesterday, but "HIV" still carries weight. He sags and asks, "Did she catch it?"

"Yes."

Looking at his feet, he says, "I should have stopped her. I knew it."

I spent years of rolling this moment through my head, and in the end, it isn't difficult. "You couldn't have talked to her, Dad. You couldn't have chased her. You had to take care of me, remember?"

That earns a nod and a little smile.

I give another command, and that girl reemerges. Sitting in a tall-backed leather chair, she talks to us. She talks to my father. She describes murders and names those responsible, and what never fails to astonish me is how sick she looks. The disease wants to eat her to the bone. Her voice is little more than a whisper but she manages to carry off her testimony with a fetching weird grace, leaving no one in doubt about who had killed whom and for what tiny reason.

"That was the Arizona war," Dad says.

"You remember that?"

"Pieces of it." Watching her, he says, "She did some good there, didn't she?"

"A real champion, yeah."

I don't know when the tears started. But he cries until he feels self-conscious, wiping at his nose, at his eyes, asking, "Where did Mom put my handkerchiefs?"

The squidskin falls back to white.

"Phuong got a different name and home," I tell him.

"You're the mayor," he says. "Can you find out when she died?"

"Mayors can bend some rules and look at old court videos," I admit. "But it wouldn't be smart, giving us the witness' address."

"I suppose not."

A moment passes.

"Do you know how I became mayor?"

"The old guy died. In office, wasn't it?"

"Exactly."

He looks at me, and I say, "FlameHead."

Eighty seconds of history flows across the wall. I lived those days and pieced together this footage, and it still makes me sick enough to ache.

My father tries to watch, but there's too much motion, too many sounds. He puts his face down and covers his ears, and I cut the history with one quiet, "End."

Maybe I shouldn't have shown that part.

"Tough times," he says.

"Yeah."

"Kind of glad I can't remember them," he says.

The next moments feel best being silent. Then I say, "By the way, Dad. The girl didn't die."

"Really," he says. As if he doesn't quite believe me.

"They got her disease under control, and eventually she went back to school and

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did well for herself. Even had a family, all grown now.”

His face pinches in; he has to be wondering how much time has passed.

“Your mystery became my mystery,” I say. “Eventually I had a couple AI packages watching the world for nothing but that one girl’s face. She would look older, sure, and they imagined her with various hair and tattoos and cosmetic surgeries.”

“You found her?”

“I won’t tell you how long it took. But finally, yeah, I found her.”

I don’t know when the old man has looked more hopeful. He leans at the white wall again, waiting for whatever comes next.

“How do people treat you here, Dad?”

“They treat me fine.”

“Are they nice to you?”

He doesn’t want to chat about his home. “Yeah, the staff is nice. Smiles and singing all day long.”

“Do people talk about the world outside? I know they’re not supposed to. But do events ever get mentioned, maybe in passing?”

“Maybe.”

“Is the world burning anymore?”

“It’s hot out there.”

“And growing hotter. But today, this minute, are we at each other’s throats?”

He looks at me.

“Dad,” I say. “More than not, it’s peaceful in the world.”

“Good.”

“Wonder why?”

“No.”

“You don’t remember. But that FlameHead technology was awful. Turning populations against themselves with rough mind control . . . that’s a monstrous way of attacking anybody, including other monsters . . .”

“Yeah, I’ll agree with that.”

“But what if people got scared enough to do anything to save themselves? For instance, what if they used that same wicked technology? There could be a little implant or new gland that would give human behavior a nudge. A good nudge, I mean. When the world grows desperate, that would look like the reasonable solution. Push all of us into a sane, optimistic state of mind.”

Dad shakes his head. “I don’t know.”

“Of course no one person could build such a tool. To do it right would take hundreds of specialists, scientists and social engineers and so on. Everybody would work in secret. The project would have to be tested before the public was aware. And then three weeks after the field trials and the first oceans of data, the project leaders would announce that maybe the world hasn’t been saved, but at least the survivors on the lifeboat would stop being so damn mean to one another.”

He stares at me.

“I want to show one more video, Dad.”

I don’t know how much he understands. But my father crosses his arms and squeezes down on his chest.

The wall remains white.

My plan is to show him scenes clipped from the historic press conference. One word from me and the girl of his dreams reappears, sitting at one end of a long table, older by decades and dressed in drab professional garb, but retaining a taste for ridiculously tall shoes. She was in charge of the biochemical toxicity team, which was why our optimism will last through today and for the rest of our lives.

But setting up the scene has taken far too long. I was busy talking, and those blue

eyes have lost their fragile focus.

Regret hits, and I promise myself to never try this trick again.

Then Dad says, "You know what?"

"What?"

"Next time I have that dream, I'm telling her. 'I couldn't help you because I was looking after my son. And quit bothering me, young lady.'"

"That's a good idea, Dad."

"I think so," he agrees.

At that point, I get up to leave. ○

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Fix

I hold the blinking device up.
"You there?" she asks, disconsolate,
tears like sequins sewn into her voice.
"Yes, miss, I'm here." I live for this, these days.
"I dunno . . . I don't think that I can
forget him." She sobs—
—and then I press the button.

The device buzzes, loudly, then goes silent.
The woman stops weeping, asks, "What was I saying?"
"I can't recall. But how do you feel now?"
"Fine . . . um. Better than ever. Wait . . . how . . . ?"
"G'night," I say, hang up, set the alien
device back in its blinking alien cradle.

I used to think they might call back someday,
the memories returned, again the pain
or longing, sickness or anger back
and burning bright, but it never, ever, happens.

Life just always gets simply, somehow better.
Only problem is, I've started to crave
the kick of fixing everything away,
melting pains into joys, or okay-I-guesses.
It's all I think of, when I go back home,
this itch for a hotline call, a fixup hit.

It's all too simple, too tidily convenient.
The implication of the device is this:
our sorrows, pains, trials all meaningless—
not good for us, no lessons to be learned:
just purposeless pain to be erased, or not.

Tonight, I'm going to use it on myself. And then, I think, the device will disappear . . .

. . . or might it just instead disappear me?
I lift the gizmo up from its alien cradle;
smile, close my eyes, and press the button hard.

—Gord Sellar

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KILL SWITCH

Benjamin Crowell

Ben Crowell, like Albert Einstein, is a physicist and a musician. A physics colleague of Ben's who knew Einstein says that Einstein was an abysmal violinist. Ben has upheld that tradition in his own jazz and classical performances. Sitting in the last viola chair in his college's symphony, Ben once got through all of Mahler's fourth without ever playing when his section was supposed to have a rest. We hope that the characters in the author's latest tale show more musical promise than either Ben or Einstein.

Jo was in the middle of a saxophone solo when she made the decision to go phenotypically male. She was playing a quartet gig in a fantastic venue, a month-long summer retreat so far gone in the California redwoods that you got there on an asphalt road with a yellow line down the middle, just like in the old movies.

Almost everyone in the audience was a hardcore jazz fanatic, or was at least giving a good simulation—it was hard to tell whether some of the folks with goatees, berets, and sandals intended them ironically. Some seemed to be history buffs who'd been influenced by the jazz craze to switch from Civil War reenactments to smoking authentic reefer and trying to talk like Cab Calloway.

Regardless, they were a blast to play for. There was an older contingent, but also a lot of people Jo's age or younger who'd been genemodded for music. In a solo, she could slip in a quote from some old Art Blakey tune, and if she did it artfully enough they'd all recognize it and laugh and clap. On a Latin number with mad-scientist cross-rhythms, you'd see a kid beating out the syncopations on the picnic table with a plastic fork in one hand and a soda straw in the other, all while patting a foot three-against-four. The old couples—some of them looked like they might be old enough to have seen Art Blakey—made up for their natural chromosomes with extra enthusiasm, clapping on two and four and lindy-hopping in the aisles as if their calcium-boosted bones were made of titanium.

The band came down sweet and soft on a sandpapery dissonance at the end of "Lonely Woman," and then Jo switched horns from soprano to tenor and gave a crazy-fast count for "Cherokee." They blazed through the head of the old standard, and then the drummer catapulted Jo into her solo with a roll like a well-oiled machine gun. A redhead old broad in the front, whose perky little boobs made her look like a walking ad for anageriatrics, started pumping a bony fist in the air and yelling "Go! Go!" Jo made eye contact with her and built up to a bluesy squeal as they got to the bridge.

Then Bud, the piano player, a big, hairy ultra-male pheno, landed on a wrong chord. Jo bit into the same beat on a screaming A-sharp, and the clash with Bud's A-natural was about as subtle as two sumo wrestlers colliding. You could see the shock wave going out through the crowd. As the changes whizzed by like a chain of firecrackers, it became obvious that this wasn't just a wrong note, it was Bud telling

a whole different harmonic story than Jo—Othello walking away from the bed while Desdemona pretends to struggle under the pillow. Now Jo's solo was a train wreck that she had to clean up.

She turned to Bud, smiled around her mouthpiece, and fit a huge, obvious arpeggio into her solo to spell out the next chord. Jo was the soloist, Bud was only comping, so even if Jo had been wrong—which she wasn't—it would be Bud's job to mesh with her. But he stuck to his guns. The crowd was confused. They all knew the tune, an old warhorse, and the music-modded ones could chart every twist in the two contradictory chord progressions unwinding on top of each other. *Did the band reharmonize the bridge? Who's out, the horn player or the piano player?* Now Bud was moving his lips. The son of a bitch was mouthing the chords to her, as if *she* was the screw-up, and doing it so the audience could see.

You can't argue with hormones. Jazz had always been a male world, born in the whorehouses of New Orleans. Jo fired Bud that night and finished the festival with her quartet cut down to a trio. Then she drove back through the redwoods to San Francisco, tubed home to New York, and checked in to a clinic for the flip to male.

Hormones.

It was a Friday night less than a month after Jo got out of the clinic, and he was between sets at a hole-in-the-wall in Jackson Heights that was wedged between a laundromat and an automated Chinese take-out. Only briefly, for a couple of years in high school, had Jo been a boy, and the years since then had dulled the first-person memories of maleness. Now he found himself in the corridor outside the bathroom, wrestling like a Neanderthal with a drunken customer who'd insisted on pawing a waitress.

After the bouncer and a Public Peace waldo arrived to get rid of the guy, Jo went out in the alley with the waitress to chill out. It didn't occur to him until then that the wrestling hadn't been a completely necessary part of the solution to the problem—or that the waitress had actually been handling the situation pretty effectively on her own. But that was how it was with testosterone. Something happened, and you said to yourself, *Did I just do that?*

The waitress's name was Chris. She shared a 'lectric of synthweed with him, and as he was heading back in for the next set she kissed him on the cheek.

Saturday morning, in the very small kitchen of his very large apartment in Bed-Stuy, there he was trying to make her giggle by flipping pancakes while simultaneously trying to dance a Fred Astaire tap routine from *Top Hat*. Instead of giggling she got a serious look on her face.

"You must have been modded."

"A little," Jo admitted. "Just for music. My folks didn't have a lot of money. You?"

"My moms are both grade-school teachers. I was an off-the-shelf combo, math and music. Minored in composition in college. I do arrangements for a few of the local salsa bands."

Jo nodded sympathetically. Unless Chris had chosen to look older than she was, she was a first-gen mod, just like him. Back then, nobody had really known how gengineering would play out. These days everybody realized that if you wanted your kid to be a professional mathematician, you needed to be able to afford top-of-the-line gene work. Live music, on the other hand, was booming. So many people had minor mods for music that you couldn't entertain them by streaming the same recording at them over and over. If you could play jazz, the world was your oyster in a way that it hadn't been since two hundred years ago, in the era of Jim Crow and smoke-filled nightclubs.

While they ate their pancakes Jo noticed Chris tapping a ragtimey rhythm against the table leg with her big toes. He pretended not to notice. By the time they finished

breakfast it was ten o'clock. Chris saw the keyboard in the corner with a bath towel draped over it. Jo got out his tenor and they played a couple of Chano Pozo songs together. Her playing was a little stiff and square, but serviceable.

"I'm supposed to pick up the tail end of the lunch shift at noon," Chris said.

"You've got to go?"

She laughed. He must have looked like a crestfallen puppy. "I could use some clothes that don't smell like yesterday."

"Um, I guess I never mentioned, but I just pulled a flip three weeks ago. Got a whole closet full of fem clothes, and I think we're the same size."

Chris looked sad and put her hand on his cheek. "That's not the only thing. I didn't quite tell you the truth about my mods. My parents started with an off-the-shelf, but then they got someone to do some unlicensed work on top of that. Kind of a botch. I've got this thing where . . . when I was four, I spent a week singing the Ode to Joy, non-stop. I've got pills I take for it. If I don't get home and pop one before my shift—what?"

"Tonalexa? Hundred-milligram tabs?"

"Three-hundreds. Four times daily with water."

"Help yourself, plenty in the medicine cabinet."

After Chris got back from her shift, neither of them had to work until Tuesday. They took a medication vacation together. It wasn't completely safe to go on or off Tonalexa abruptly, but each of them promised to watch for the danger signs in the other.

When Jo woke up Sunday morning, Chris was already out of bed. He checked the clock: nine A.M. They'd both been off their meds for over twenty-four hours. As he slid out of bed, he could tell from the *shisssss* that the sheets were freshly washed. In the bathroom, he brushed his teeth in a drawn-out accelerando. *Chugga-chugga, chugga-chugga*. The locomotive sloooowly built up a head of steam until it was whistling down the tracks.

Thirty-seven years of taking his meds religiously. A week ago, if anyone had asked, he would have volunteered a list of all their positive effects, starting in fourth grade, when he was finally able to sit still in school and not use his desk as a drum set. Now he felt more like he'd spent thirty-seven years being deaf.

August in Prospect Park was hot and sticky. One person singing the Hallelujah Chorus would have made passersby turn away and hurry their steps. Two doing it in harmony and counterpoint made people clap and look for a hat where they could toss their coin-cards.

Jo switched the social wall in the living room to do-not-disturb mode, showing a holo of a meadow in the Swiss Alps. There was nobody around to judge their behavior. By Monday they both knew at which point in the cycle the herd of goats wandered across the meadow. Messages from his friends piled up, and then messages from Chris's once they figured out where she was.

Three months later they were talking about babies.

Jo's flip to male had exhausted both his deductible and his savings. Chris used her insurance to set up an initial consultation with a repro tech. Ten minutes before the appointed time, they sat fidgeting on Jo's couch, trying not to stare at the ticking clock on the social. Not only were they nervous, they were both back on full meds, and to Jo the world was as cold and muffled as Atlantis at the bottom of the ocean.

"The last time I felt this fluttery was when my mom was dragging me to chess matches," Chris said. "Do we have any dissolvies left?"

"I don't know," Jo said. He'd never liked nicotine. "We're going to have to be careful to keep those out of reach once the baby is crawling around."

A window finally popped up on the social. YOU'LL BE MEETING WITH YOUR PERSONAL ADVISER SUSAN. PLEASE CLICK OK TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT SUSAN IS NOT A DOCTOR. They clicked through the preliminaries and waited until the screen lit up with a picture of a woman with a portly, middle-aged pheno.

"Hi, I'm Sasithorn Jungrungreangkit, but please call me Susan." There was a flat picture on her desk of her with two teenage kids. Jo and Chris introduced themselves.

"I understand that you two are thinking of having a baby."

"Right," Jo said. Did his voice sound as robotic to other people as it did to him right now? "The thing is, it's kind of complicated, because we want our kid to be real strong in music, but we both have these first-gen mods where they messed up the work."

"Yes, I can see that on your charts. Actually these aren't as bad as some I've seen from that period." Her lips didn't quite match her words. Maybe there was a filter daemon cleaning up her accent, or maybe the damn pills were blurring time. "Do you take Tonalexa for it?"

"Yeah, but it's like we have to choose whether to feel dead musically or . . ."

"Jo functions okay, but when I'm off my meds even my friends can't stand me."

"I think I can set your minds at ease about the baby. You didn't know that your mods both had kill-switches?"

"They have what?" Jo asked.

"My parents never liked it when I asked questions about that kind of thing," Chris said. "The job obviously wasn't totally legit, and I think they were afraid they'd get in trouble, or I would."

"You're in the U.S.? You can't get in legal trouble there for your own genes. Anyhow, what a kill-switch means is that you have a master gene that switches on a big set of your artificial music genes. It's recessive, so unless you'd both had exactly the same mods, there's no way your kids would express it. It's a routine precaution for a mod that hasn't been tested in humans, and you also see it in a lot of well-tested mods these days, because it's a form of job security for the engineers. They don't want to optimize the gene pool in a single generation and then be out of work forever."

"Wait," Chris said, "you mean if we just had kids with no gene work at all, they wouldn't be musical?"

"No, I'm sure they'd be quite musical because of their environment. And genetically . . . your parents, were they musicians?"

"One of mine," Chris said.

"Both of mine," Jo said.

"So it's very likely your child will be talented."

"You mean," Chris said, "if we just . . ."

"Yes, if you simply mix your chromosomes naturally. I see that Chris is geno-male, so you wouldn't even have to worry about whether your insurance would cover a Y chromosome if you wanted a boy."

Chris was geno-male? How could Jo not have known that?

"But—" Jo said "—just randomly . . . isn't that taking a big chance?"

"It doesn't seem safe," Chris said. "We're not rolling in money, but it's not like we're, you know . . ."

"We don't want to be irresponsible," Jo said.

"Hmm, New York City?" Susan said. "I'm not fluent in that social context, but I suppose there would be some disapproval incurred. But I assure you, it's perfectly safe. Why, your great-great-grandparents probably didn't even go to a hospital for childbirth, much less conception."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Jo wondered whether the "not a doctor" thing was really code meaning that she was a gatekeeper who was supposed to find an excuse to deny coverage. He felt Chris's fingernails dig into his palm and realized he

needed to say something diplomatic before she went ballistic.

"It's really great to hear about all kinds of options," Jo said. "That's one that we never would have thought of ourselves, and we'll definitely keep it in mind. But now let's look at some other choices."

"All right," Susan said. "Now you have to realize that the human brain is already pretty thoroughly optimized by evolution. We only have so many neurons, synapses, and gap junctions to allocate to different cortical modules. If we increase one thing, we have to reduce another." She made a motion with her hands like the see-sawing pans of a balance.

"Sure," Chris said. "I have all kinds of math mods that I don't need to pass on. I never use them myself."

"That helps," Susan said, "but maybe not as much as you'd think. Music is tied in with analytic and symbolic reasoning. Einstein played the violin. The trouble with music as a genetic target is that music uses so many different parts of the brain. That's why songbirds sing. It's so the male can prove to the ladies that he's an all-around stud. I have to warn you, you're getting to the point of diminishing returns. If you want to do very much better than natural mixing, the work isn't going to be cheap."

In three days they had a treatment plan, a cost estimate with a frightening string of zeroes on the end, and a letter from Chris's insurance company saying that Chris and Jo would have to pay the full amount out of pocket. They commiserated with each other, and when that didn't seem to be enough sympathy, they stopped neglecting their social and posted about their woes. Jo's running partner Rayy, who Jo hadn't run with in a month and a half, text-posted back: NEBRASKA GIVES INCENTIVES TO KEEP THE POP UP, 30-YEAR LOAN AT 3%. BALLOON PMT IF YOU MOVE OUT OF STATE. KID AS COLLATERAL—NOT REALLY, HA HA. RUN MONDAY?

They took the commuter tube to Chicago, stopped for dinner and drinks and a long walk by the lake, and then picked up their rental car. When Jo woke in the morning Chris was still asleep, with her tablet in her lap showing a map, and there were endless fields of hydrogen beans outside his window. The rows swept past, always converging to a vanishing point somewhere near the rising sun. Diagonals flickered in and out of the geometry, sliding over each other. Jo had a wistful feeling that if he hadn't been back on full meds, his brain could have made the flickers into a beautiful rhythm, like the sound from a distant orchestra of guiros and washboards.

He looked over at Chris. What a mess they were. Maybe the world would have been better off if genetic engineering had been against the law from the start. What if they ended up producing a kid who was messed up in some different way than its parents? Maybe they'd be better off just playing the chromosome lottery, like the adviser had said. But that would never fly with Chris. She had everything mapped out, just like the map of Nebraska in her lap.

North Platte was small enough that it didn't really matter where they parked. They found a spot in the shade of a tree and walked up B Street, stretching their stiff limbs. They had an hour and a half until their appointment with the realtor. The state government had it set up so they could live in a house in town for a month rent-free before making a commitment. They passed a boarded-up gas station with rusting pumps that dated back to the ethanol era, then a manicured public park where a boy was pedaling a tricycle.

His mother looked up from her tablet. "Morning."

"Hi," Jo said. "Is there someplace in town where we could get breakfast?"

"Kimmie's, around the corner on Bryan." She hooked a thumb.

"Thanks."

"Did you see that?" Chris murmured. "No helmet! Is that normal around here?"

They sat down at the counter and ordered eggs over well and hash browns. The waitress, who was also the cook, got the spuds started on a griddle behind the counter. She produced four white ovoids from a refrigerator, cracked them open with her bare hands, and dumped the goopy contents out onto the griddle. Jo and Chris exchanged glances. The whites weren't actually white at first. They started out transparent and then turned opaque as they cooked.

Jo decided to take a chance on the eggs. The white tasted normal. He dug around with his fork as discreetly as possible to make sure there wasn't a fuzzy baby chick hidden inside the yolk. Chris used her knife to scoot her eggs over to the lip of her plate, and then dug into her hash browns.

"What's the matter, honey? You said over well, right? I can put 'em back on to cook if you want 'em a little firmer."

"Oh, no, I just wasn't as hungry as I thought. That's a lot of carbs there."

Out on the street again, it was already hot and humid. Chris said, "Oh, Jesus, those poor baby birds. How could you eat that? How long until the realtor?"

"Forty-five minutes." The pictures of the house looked incredible, especially considering the price. Outside of town, right on the river. They drifted back toward the car.

When they passed the park, the boy and his mother were gone, but there was a whitish animal digging in the sandbox.

"What's that?" Jo asked. "Do they have coyotes around here?"

"Is it a dog?"

"If someone sent it out for a walk, you'd think its bot would be with it."

"If it poops," Chris said, "who's going to pick up after it?"

"Or what if it bites somebody?"

"It's probably trained not to do that."

The dog circled around as if preparing to lie down in its newly dug nest in the cool sand, but then it saw Jo and Chris. It stepped laboriously over the edge of the sandbox, wagging its tail, and walked toward them slowly, as if its joints hurt. Its coat must once have been yellow. It walked up to Chris, sat down, and looked up at her, still wagging its tail.

"It seems okay," Jo said. No collar. He looked around again for a bot.

The old dog rolled over on its back and wiggled. Jo knelt down next to it.

"Be careful."

"I don't think he's much of a man-eater. Kind of skinny. I can see his ribs."

Jo scratched the dog's belly, and there was more happy wriggling. When Jo stood up, the dog dragged himself to his feet and rubbed his muzzle against Joe's leg.

Chris had her phone out. "I'll call Public Peace."

"Don't do that. They'll put him in a cage or something."

"Well, what are we going to do? He seems nice enough right now, but animals can be unpredictable. For all we know, he already bit that little boy and they're on the way to the hospital. She was barely even keeping an eye on him."

"Dogs are like people," Jo said. "Once you know how they are, they don't change for no reason. I think he's hungry. Let's go back to the café and get a couple of hot dogs for him."

"Jo, are you crazy? We don't have *time* for this."

"Just call the car and have it meet us at the café. Plenty of parking in this ghost town. Come on, boy," he said to the dog. He took a couple of steps, and it followed him.

"Excuse me, but could you address *me*, your partner, instead of the animal? We've got a plan for what we're doing this morning, so let's just stick to it."

"It's not a chart for a Mozart symphony, baby. Loosen up. Nothing bad happens if the woodwinds come in a couple bars late."

Jo got his way by continuing to put one foot in front of the other. At the café, he was afraid to walk through the door because the dog might follow him in, or maybe wander off. "Excuse me," he called, "ma'am?"

The waitress smiled and came to the door. "I see you've got a new friend."

"You don't know who his owner is, do you?"

The car showed up and parked.

"No, but the town's been slowly bleeding people. A lot of them leave their pets behind, especially if they're moving to a big city."

"Could we buy some food to give him, a burger patty or something?"

"Yeah, sure, don't worry about paying." She went behind the counter.

"Jo, seriously, you're going to be a father soon. You can't just wander off and chase butterflies. We need to be responsible."

He knelt down and petted the dog. "I am being responsible. I'm being responsible for putting some food in this guy's belly, which is more than his owners seem to be doing for him right now."

A white sports car pulled up, and an androgynous person in a white suit got out. Jo recognized the realtor's face from the holo.

"Hi, I thought that looked like you guys. How are you two? Wiped out from your trip?"—handshaking while talking—"I didn't remember that you mentioned a dog? Not a problem, though. You've got a nice big yard with a fence. How in the world did you manage with this beast in New York?" Jo opened his mouth to try to explain, but the realtor moved on to addressing the dog. "You are the cutest old critter, aren't you?"—ruffing up the fur on its head—"Oh, aren't you? You *are*, yes you *are* the cutest."

Without telling Chris, Jo cut his dosage of Tonalexa to a quarter of what he'd been taking. As they met people and tried on the town for size, he kept wondering whether the person he was introducing himself as was the real him. Maybe he should add a disclaimer: *The guy you're meeting is just one version of me. It's me on a hundred milligrams a day.*

The vet couldn't pick up a signal from any chip implanted under the dog's skin, and nobody responded to a local ad on the net. They named him Silver, and after strained negotiations they arrived at a compromise under which he came inside at sunset and was exiled to the back yard again every morning.

What Jo liked about Silver was that the dog didn't care about Jo's med levels. At a hundred mg, Jo could more or less keep on an even keel socially, and when he played a couple of New York gigs over the net he felt more sharp and creative than he had in years. Sometimes at the lower dose a feeling would build up like an itch or an urge to sneeze. He learned to feel it coming on, and when it did, he'd tell Chris he was taking Silver for a walk. The old dog would plod along the deserted riverside trail, looking happy to be smelling the grass and the water even when his footsteps were like *adagio* quarter notes. Jo would whistle the melody of "My Funny Valentine" thirty-two times in a row without variation, or cover the whole mile's walk doing the same basic fox-trot. When they got back, the itch would be gone and Chris wouldn't know that anything had been wrong.

One of the two net gigs picked up seventy thousand views by word of mouth, and people starting calling from both coasts to book him for live work, not caring that he could only do it by telepresence. He'd found a groove, and if he went back to New York, he wouldn't be able to keep it going. If he foxtrotted for a mile down Atlantic Avenue, they'd throw him in the loony bin.

On the Tuesday of their second week in Nebraska, Jo got a call for a job filling in Saturday night for a section player in a big band at a swanky San Francisco tourist

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restaurant. On Wednesday the leader called back again and said they'd had a lot of interest in Jo, and she wanted to put him on the bill and have him take three or four solos. Saturday afternoon he broke his Tonalexa tablet into halves and threw one in the toilet as usual. He stared at the other half in his palm for a long time and finally tossed it in after the first.

The gig went great, and with encores Jo didn't get to bed until three A.M. Nebraska time. When he woke up Sunday the light filtering through the blinds was a funny greenish color that made him think of wholitone scales and seasickness.

He said good morning to Chris, who was working in the holo volume on a big, tall score with lots of parts. He got himself a cup of coffee.

"You've got an F-sharp in your B-flat chord where the horns come back in."

She didn't look up from her work. "Honey, you know it drives me nuts when you kibitz."

"Sorry."

Silver was lying down on his belly on the back stoop under the awning. It was cloudy, and inkblots slid fast across the rectangle of sky beyond the sliding glass door. The dog had his head down between his paws as if he was trying to make himself small. Rain started to patter on the windows.

"I'll let Silver in."

"Honey, we had a deal. I can't work with him in here."

"It's starting to rain hard."

"He'll track mud on the carpets. You want to lose our cleaning deposit?"

The implication took Jo by surprise. He'd picked up hints from Chris that she wasn't crazy about North Platte, but they'd agreed to avoid talking the subject to death and wait until it was time to make a final decision at the end of the month.

"I'll get a towel and make sure he's clean first."

"Sweetie, he's fine. He's an animal. He's got fur. He's sheltered from the rain, and it's not even cold out there."

Jo took his coffee mug outside and sat down next to Silver on the stoop. Silver's tail went thump-thump on the cool concrete. Thump-thump-thump-thump. The tempo clicked in Jo's brain. It was the same as the one they'd taken the night before on "Isotope." He knew that if he went back in the house and checked, it would be between 92 and 94 beats per minute. Near the horizon there was a flash of lightning that landed a dotted sixteenth note before the downbeat. One-and-two-and-three-and-four-and. He put his hand on the dog's shoulder to keep him calm when the thunder arrived. ◦

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ALIVE AND WELL, A LONG WAY FROM ANYWHERE

Allen M. Steele

Allen Steele tells us that his latest tale belongs to his Near Space series. "The idea kicked around in my mind for a long time until I learned about the discovery of 2010 TK7. That supplied the missing piece of a puzzle; in ten minutes, I'd figured out the rest of the story." Allen's most recent book, *Apollo's Outcasts*, is a young-adult SF novel that will be published later this year by Pyr.

When Jerry Stone died, exactly three minutes and thirty-six seconds went by before anyone on Earth knew he was gone. That was the time it took for the med bracelet on his left wrist to register his final heartbeat and relay that information to the Stone House's main computer, which in return transmitted an automatic signal across the 40,362,000 miles that currently lay between asteroid 2010 TK7 and Earth.

JSTONE LIFE FACTORS TERMINAL. That was the text of the message, as terse and coldly factual as only a computer could express it. I was asleep when someone minding the graveyard shift at a deep-space communications center in Texas called to tell me the news. I'm embarrassed to admit that the first thing to enter my mind wasn't that Jerry Stone, my boss for the last forty-two years, was dead, but rather the fact that there's a two-hour time difference between Houston and Reno, and that the kid who called from Texas hadn't taken a moment to consider whether an old guy like me might still be in bed at 5 AM.

How rude of Jerry to pass away at such an inconvenient hour.

I got up and made coffee, then went to my desk to read the report sent to me via encrypted mail. It wasn't until I saw that terse message from the Stone House, followed by the flatlined biofeedback from Jerry's bracelet, that the truth sank in. I don't know how long I stared at the desk screen, only that my coffee was cold when I picked it up again.

Jeremiah Edward Stone, age seventy-two, was dead. The founder and CEO of ConSpace, once the largest private space corporation, was no longer among the living. Not that anyone would have noticed. It had been more than four decades since

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Jerry Stone had rubbed elbows with the rest of the human race. Since December 23, 2063, his only companions had been the packs of fogzs he'd raised. Indeed, I was one of the few people who'd spoken to him in many years.

Now he was gone, and I didn't know how I was supposed to feel. Sadness, relief . . . I was tasting a bit of both, and something else as well: anger. A mystery had surrounded Jerry Stone for all those years. He'd never revealed its answer to anyone. I'd always hoped that he'd tell me, but he never did, and now it appeared that he never would.

"Jerry." I closed my eyes, let out my breath, and sank back in my chair. "Jerry, Jerry, Jerry . . . sometimes you really piss me off."

Then I straightened up, activated the desk's keyboard, and did what I'd always done for him. I wrote a press release.

Everyone in the world—no, scratch that; everyone in the solar system—knew Jerry Stone. Or at least they thought they did. That's the price of fame. Your face and voice are familiar to all, but the realities of your everyday existence—what you have for breakfast, your favorite colors, the little things you like or dislike—are trivialities very few people know and which probably wouldn't interest them even if they did. The greater your celebrity, the more you become a caricature of yourself, until you vanish as a person and simply become a media image.

These are the public facts about Jerry Stone. Born in 2027 to a middle-class family in Decatur, Georgia, he began building his fortune at age twelve, when he started using part of his weekly allowance to invest in penny stock. From his bedroom, Jerry played the stock market the way other kids played computer games; he was a child prodigy when it came to venture capital investment, and could have taught a Wall Street trader a few tricks. He was making more money than his parents by the time he turned sixteen, and was already a millionaire when he graduated high school.

For someone like him, college wasn't necessary. He went anyway, if only because it was a great way to meet girls. In three years he'd graduated from the Yale business school with a Skull and Bones ring on his finger and more women than he could handle. At twenty-three, he was one of the world's youngest billionaires.

By then, humankind had established itself as a spacefaring civilization. Solar power satellites were in geosynchronous orbit above Earth. Industrial bases had been built on the Moon, mining its regolith for helium-3 and rare-earth minerals. Multi-national companies had established colonies on Mars. The first efforts to mine main-belt asteroids had begun. Even distant Jupiter was on its way to being exploited for its vast reserves of He³. The solar system was the new place to make serious money, and Jerry was among the many major investors who'd bankrolled companies like Skycorp and Uchu-Hiko. But Jerry wasn't just another entrepreneur looking to score big bucks from space development. In an interview for *Fortune*, he said that he'd been fascinated by space since childhood, when he'd seen images of the first expedition to reach Mars; indeed, he pointed out that the first stock he'd ever bought was for a small company that manufactured solenoids for orbital satellites. Jerry put money into everything from cars to chickens, but space was always his primary interest; a percentage of the profits he made from the other stuff was sunk into the space industry, and as always he had an uncanny ability to predict which companies were worth the investment.

Sometimes his prescience was scary. No one else foresaw that the major space companies would go bankrupt after the Descartes Station lunar colony declared independence and formed what would eventually become the Pax Astra. Even as the lunar revolution was heating up, Jerry secretly met with other major space investors

and laid out the facts as he saw them: if the revolution was successful, it would eventually grow to include the Mars settlements, and anyone who tried to compete with them was doomed because the lunar and Martian colonies would hold all the cards. So the smart thing to do would be to wait until a company like Skycorp was about to fold, as it inevitably would, then sell their stock for whatever it was worth, take the money, and start a new corporation that would do business with the Pax Astra.

The other investors paid attention to Jerry. Most of them, at least. Those who didn't find themselves holding worthless stock when his predictions turned out to be correct. The investors who knew better than to argue with a twenty-five-year-old *wunderkind* became the Board of Directors of ConSpace, the phoenix that rose from the ashes of the old establishment. Naturally, they elected Jeremiah Edward Stone as its president and CEO. They had no choice; Jerry was also the majority shareholder.

A number of financial sages, from New York to Hong Kong, said that ConSpace was a gamble. Certainly it was, but it wasn't a crapshoot; Jerry knew what he was doing. Once the Mars colonies joined Descartes Station to form the Pax Astra, they discovered that they still needed to do business with Earth if the Pax was going to survive. And since ConSpace had already established itself as the main interplanetary transport company, the Pax had no choice but to contract with ConSpace.

As CEO, Jerry deferred an annual salary in exchange for a percentage from the cost-per-pound surcharge for every payload that went to or from Earth. A number of people thought he was crazy, but he knew exactly what he was doing. By the time he turned thirty-five, Jerry Stone was one of the wealthiest men alive. No one except him and his accountants knew the extent of his assets, but it was estimated to be as much as a hundred billion dollars.

Jerry was hardly a recluse in those days. Far from it. He was almost always in the news. One day he was escorting a famous supermodel down the red carpet of a Hollywood premiere. A few days later, he'd be sighted on the aft deck of his ninety-foot yacht, warming himself beneath the Mediterranean sun while another beautiful woman rubbed oil on his back. A week later, he was on the Moon, joining a hiking party to walk the length of the Straight Wall. And then it was back to Earth, to cut the ribbon of another children's hospital.

Jerry Stone was a man all men aspired to be: billionaire, philanthropist, adventurer, lover, hero. I'm not sure, though, that he truly enjoyed his life. When I saw pictures of him—at the cotillion, at the European race track, at the president's inaugural ball—it always seemed to me that his smile was just a little too wide, his eyes gleaming just a little too brightly, as if he was consciously forcing himself to be happy, and not quite succeeding.

There were also peculiar aspects of his personality. The fact that he always wore the same outfit—black long-sleeve shirt, black trousers, black socks, black shoes—was obvious, of course, but accepted as a minor eccentricity; indeed, quite a number of guys emulated his style. And it was well-known that Jerry was a strict vegetarian who was revolted by the very sight of meat.

Yet only those close to him knew about his oddest tendencies. He showered at least twice a day, three times if he wasn't too busy, and washed his hands constantly. One of the women who went to bed with Jerry told me that he insisted upon turning off all the lights before anyone took off their clothes, and that sex was brief, mechanical, and unsatisfying. After a while, he stopped dating women entirely. And once Jerry had enough money that he could set the rules of engagement, his business partners soon found that they almost never had personal meetings with him. Jerry preferred to speak with them via video hookup, even when he was in the same building as the persons who'd made appointments to see him.

Something happened to him. Exactly what, we'll probably never know. One thing about having money and power: no one can tell you what to do, even when it's for your own good. In fact, it's hard to find anyone honest enough to tell you that you need help . . . and Jerry was known to have a quick temper, particularly when it came to criticism. A psychiatrist told me that, based on the available evidence, he believed Jerry had developed a social phobia that manifested itself in a number of obsessive compulsive disorders. But since Jerry refused to see anyone, voluntary psychiatric examination was unlikely.

At any rate, his public appearances became increasingly infrequent, until he was rarely seen anymore. He lived either on his yacht, which no longer went anywhere but instead became permanently anchored in the San Diego harbor just off Coronado, or in his chalet in the Swiss Alps, which he'd reach by suborbital shuttle from a private spaceport in southern California. Models and movie stars were no longer his consorts, and drop-in visits to four-star restaurants became a thing of the past. ConSpace rolled right along, making money like no other company in the twenty-first century, but its founder and CEO became a recluse only occasionally seen on some vice-president's wall screen.

Someone like Jerry doesn't withdraw from the public eye without questions being asked, and it wasn't long before his behavior became the subject of media speculation. The talking heads spent countless hours wondering what was going on; their theories ran from him having some hideous disease, perhaps a form of skin cancer that had permanently disfigured him, to the bizarre notion that he was dead, a victim of an accident that had taken his life, and that ConSpace was covering up his demise by carrying on the pretense that he was still alive. Photographers staked out his yacht, his chalet, even the spaceport, but all their long lenses ever caught was a distant figure, wearing a black overcoat and a slouch hat, who disappeared almost as quickly as he was spotted.

One of those blurred snapshots had appeared on a gossip site the morning I received a request to meet with ConSpace's executive vice-president. I had just sat down at my desk in the company's public relations department when I opened the red-flagged email. I stared at the brief message for a minute or so, wondering what I had done that would cause me to be summoned to Alberto Diaz's office. Was it a press release I had written? Coming back late from my lunch breaks? Was I about to be laid off only eight months after going to work for ConSpace? I had no idea. The email told me to come at once, so I put on the tie I kept in my desk drawer, left my cube without telling anyone where I was going, and took the elevator up to the top floor.

I thought I was about to be fired. I wasn't, but had I known what was about to happen, I would have quit right then and there.

Diaz's assistant was apparently expecting me. A perfect smile and a tilted request to wait just a moment, then she levitated through the oak door behind her. I had just enough time to admire the Chinese silk tapestries before she reappeared. Mr. Diaz would see me now, and would I like coffee?

You're usually not offered coffee just before you're fired, so I relaxed a little as she ushered me into Diaz's office. My entire department could have been relocated to that one room; the carpet alone was probably worth more than my salary. Alberto Diaz was seated behind an antique chestnut desk in front of floor-to-ceiling windows; Houston skyscrapers formed a backdrop behind him. He stood up as I walked in. A brief handshake, then I took a seat in a leather armchair across the desk from him.

I'd never met Alberto Diaz before. When I'd been interviewed for my job, the person who eventually hired me was the PR department's senior manager. This was my

first visit to the executive suite. So I sat nervously and sipped the coffee Diaz's secretary brought me while her boss studied his desk screen. There was a cryptic smile on his face as his eyes moved back and forth, and every now and then he made a satisfied grunt. Alberto Diaz was in his mid-sixties, overweight, and losing his hair. Something about him bespoke a lifelong bully who'd learned how to imitate a gentleman.

"Lauderdale," he said at last, still not looking at me even as he said my name. "Paul Lauderdale . . . very, very interesting." He nodded to the screen. "Undergraduate degree in journalism, University of Missouri. Postgrad studies at Columbia University, no degree. Three years at the *Times*, then you left journalism and went to work as a press secretary for Representative Joanna Robeson of New York . . ."

"Yes, sir. I . . ."

Diaz's eyes flitted toward me; he didn't say anything, but his expression told me that I wasn't to speak until given permission to do so. I shut up and his attention returned to his screen. "You remained her press secretary for eight years, following her as she went from the House to the Senate, and left in . . . yes, I see, 2060." He was quiet for a moment. "That was the year she was involved in that scandal, wasn't it? The one about payoffs to key House and Senate members?"

"Yes, sir."

His eyes turned toward me again, and this time they didn't move away. "Were you still working for her when she was indicted?"

"Yes, sir, I was." This wasn't something I'd told my boss during the job interview. Until now, no one at ConSpace knew about this chapter of my career. Alberto was pretty swift, picking up on something I'd tried to keep hidden.

"Uh-huh." He slowly nodded. "When did you quit?"

"About three weeks before she resigned."

"Why?" When I hesitated, a knowing smile crept across his face. "Don't worry. You're not going to lose your job. I just want to know why you decided to stop being press secretary for one of the most influential senators in Washington."

I let out my breath. "I got tired of lying for her, that's all." He seemed to be waiting, so I went on. "She was guilty, and she and I both knew it, but still I had to go out there every day and tell the press things that I knew to be untrue. After a while, I realized that I was about to be dragged down with her, so I quit."

"I see." Again, Diaz slowly nodded. "So you know how to lie."

"Yes, I do. But it doesn't mean I like . . ."

"Tell me a lie."

"What?"

"Tell me a lie. Tell me something that isn't true."

"I . . . I don't know what you . . ."

"How's your wife?"

Diaz's eyes glittered when he said that. I decided then and there that I didn't like him. Nonetheless, I gave him an answer. "She's fine. We're doing great. Happy as a pair of clams."

He didn't even glance at the desk screen. "She divorced you three months ago. Court papers say she got full custody of your daughter. That was about five months after you came to work for us, isn't that right?"

"I said we're happy. I didn't say we're still married. And you didn't ask about our daughter."

He stared at me for a moment, then laughed out loud. "Oh, well done! Outstanding! A lie and the truth at the same time!" He was genuinely amused; I forced a smile and waited for him to go on. "So . . . an experienced journalist and former Capitol Hill press secretary, now a staff writer for our public relations department. What brings you here?"

I didn't know whether or not he wanted another lie, so I played it safe and told him the truth. "I've always been interested in space, and I was sick and tired of politics, so when I left Washington I looked for a job in the industry. ConSpace seemed to be the natural place to go. An old Mizzou classmate who used to work here gave me a referral, so . . . well, here I am."

"And here you are." Diaz rocked back in his chair. The smile remained on his face as he regarded me for a few seconds. "Sort of a waste of your talents, isn't it?" he said at last. "First a *Times* reporter, then a senior staff member for a U.S. Senator . . . and now you're churning out press releases. I'd think it would be a bit of a come-down."

"I think this job offers plenty of opportunity for career advancement." An automatic response, the very same thing I'd said during my interview.

Diaz shook his head. "No . . . no, it doesn't. Oh, your salary may go up a little, and if you play your cards right you may even get your boss's job when he retires. But that's as far as you'll ever go. Ten years from now, twenty years, thirty, you'll still be doing the same thing . . . writing press releases and handling media conferences."

Had he been anyone else, I might have argued with him. One look at Alberto Diaz's beefy face, though, and I knew that he was telling the truth. My job at Con-Space was a deadend. I was destined to become nothing more than a flack, a corporate stooge doomed to a boring eight-to-five task, day after day, until someone came along and told me that the time had come for me to clean out my desk. Not the life I'd imagined for myself.

"Umm . . ." It seemed like I was supposed to say something. "Well, I . . ."

"That doesn't have to be the way it's going to be," Diaz said, rescuing me from whatever ineffectual response I was about to make. "I have a better job for you, one that's more suitable for someone of your talent and experience." A smile hovered at the corners of his mouth. "Particularly your ability to be honest and untruthful at the same time. That's a true gift, my friend, and I have a use for it."

I didn't like the way he called me "my friend," nor the fact that he considered lying to be an enviable gift, but I tried not to show it. "What do you . . . ?"

Again, his eyes hardened, and I took that as a silent cue to shut up. "You're familiar with our CEO, aren't you? Jerry Stone?" I nodded and he went on. "Well, Mr. Stone needs a personal media representative . . . someone who will act as a go-between in his relations with the public at large."

"Someone to write press releases for him," I said.

Diaz shook his head. "Oh, no. You may be doing some of that, of course, but the person he needs will do far more than the usual PR. He wants someone who will act as his public persona. Someone to speak for him, taking his statements and giving them a face and a voice acceptable to the outside world."

"A spokesman, you mean."

"Yes . . . but more than that, I think." Diaz hesitated. "In many ways, Paul, you'll be closer to him than anyone else. He may say things to you that he won't share with any of the board members . . . not even me. Of course, we'll want you to report such matters to us, but . . . well, that's something we'll have to work out."

"I see." I was becoming intrigued. "So . . . does this mean I'll be meeting with Mr. Stone on a regular basis?"

"No." Diaz shook his head. "Not in person, if that's what you mean. His dealings with you will be . . . um, a bit distant." He must have noticed the look on my face, because he leaned forward in his chair. "Mr. Stone will soon be . . . ah, shall we say, making some lifestyle changes . . . that are rather unusual. Because of this, he wants someone who will act as an intermediary. As I said, a spokesman, but more than that."

"I see," I replied, even though I didn't. "And when would I begin this job? Next week?"

"No, not for a month or two. For the time being, you'll continue your present tasks. But if everything goes according to plan, we'll be asking you to assume your new position in about eight weeks." Another smile. "Believe me, it will be much more interesting than your current job. You'll have this position for as long as you want it . . . unless Jerry says that he wants someone else, of course. If that happens, we'll find another spot for you in the company. And your pay will be commensurate with your new responsibilities."

I asked what my new salary would be, and he gave me a figure that made me realize that I would never again worry about the mortgage. Even Senator Robeson hadn't taken home that much dough before she got caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"Well . . . all right then," I said. "I'll take the job."

"Very good." Diaz's smile remained fixed; he made a small, dismissive gesture with his hand, shooing me to the door. "We'll call you when we need you."

Alberto Diaz eventually made good on his promise. But long before he called—only a couple of days after our conversation, in fact—I heard from someone else.

I had just gotten home from work when the phone buzzed. I was about to touch the VIEW button when I noticed the blinking yellow light telling me that the call was voice-only; the holo was disabled and the display read PRIVATE UNLISTED.

The only person who called me like that was my ex. Expecting another nag about late child support payments, I snatched up the receiver. "Yeah, what is it?"

"Hello?" A young-sounding male voice. "*Is this Paul Lauderdale?*"

"Yeah, what do you want?" I'm not normally that abrupt, but my former wife had really been getting on my nerves lately. Whoever was calling me sounded rattled by the way I'd answered the phone. Figuring that he was another lawyer, I wanted to keep him that way. The sooner I got rid of him, the sooner I could have a drink and make dinner.

"My apologies for the intrusion. I just wanted to . . ."

"Who is this?"

"Jerry Stone."

"Uhh . . . pardon me?"

"I'd like to, but you're making it difficult."

The voice was his; once he identified himself, I recognized him immediately. My mouth opened, closed, opened again. I discovered that it's possible to remain standing upright after your heart stops beating; it's not easy, but it can be done. "I . . . I . . . I . . ."

"Yes, Paul? You'd like to say something?" Faint amusement in his tone.

"Mr. Stone, I'm . . . I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry." I managed to find a seat somewhere besides the floor. "I didn't know . . . I mean, I thought you were . . ."

"Your ex. Either that, or her lawyer."

Not a question, but a statement of fact. For half a second, I wondered how he would have known this, then I remembered to whom I was speaking. Jerry Stone had information assets that probably matched the world's best intelligence agencies; he probably could have told me not only the name of my first-grade teacher, but also whom she'd been dating.

"Yes, sir, that's who I thought you . . ." I took a deep breath. "Sir, I know that's not a good excuse. Please pardon me for . . ."

"No reason to apologize. I called in a manner usually used by your former wife's attorneys. No wonder you mistook me for one of them." A brief chuckle. *"Actually, I'm impressed. If you're going to be my personal spokesman, there may be times when I'll want you to be rude. The press in particular will have questions that you*

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and I can't or won't answer, and telling them to go to hell may be our only option. Do you understand?"

This was not something I looked forward to doing, but I wasn't about to say so.
"Yes, sir. I understand."

"Good." A short pause. "Anyway, I just wanted to give you a quick call and take a moment to say hello. Alberto believes you're the perfect person for this job. I've looked at your record and I think he's right."

"Thank you, sir."

"I should warn you, if Al didn't, that this may be a long-term relationship. I'll be absent for quite some time, and circumstances will have it that you may be my sole means of contact with just about everyone else. So I'm expecting you to remain a ConSpace employee for many years. Do you think you can do this?"

This was not part of the agreement I'd made with Diaz, but I had little doubt that, if Jerry Stone was making this a condition of my employment, ConSpace would probably have me sign legal documents that would assure that I couldn't suddenly quit and walk away. If I said yes, the contract would be on my desk by tomorrow morning. On the other hand, the money was pretty damn good. And in the present economy, it would give considerable peace of mind to know that my job wasn't going to disappear any time soon.

"Yes, sir, I can," I said at last.

"Excellent. I'm pleased to hear this." A dry chuckle. "Well, then, I'll let you get back to what you were doing." I waited for him to ask me what I was having for dinner, but apparently that didn't interest him . . . or he already knew. "It will be a while before we speak again, so until then . . ."

"Sir . . . Mr. Stone?"

"Call me Jerry, please."

I wasn't ready to do that. "Could I ask a question, please?" No reply; he was waiting for me to go on. "When you said you were going to be absent for quite some time . . . what did you mean by that?"

"You'll find out soon enough. Good night, Paul." And then he hung up.

I said nothing to anyone about my new job. In fact, the only person who had an inkling that my life had changed was my ex-wife's lawyer, who called to thank me for sending the child-support payments on time. This discretion wasn't entirely my choice. As I expected, my promotion had come with a contractual agreement; Page 7, Paragraph 14 was a clause prohibiting me from revealing confidential information about my employer. I had no idea what Jerry was planning, but it would be unwise to make it a topic of water cooler conversation.

However, only a few days after I spoke with Jerry, I had a hint of things to come. That morning, the PR office sent out a press release about an upcoming test program. Since I wrote the release myself, I knew the details better than most people.

Over the past decade, ConSpace had been developing an experimental propulsion system that combined the best features of solar sails and lasers. The hybrid involved a very large solar-cell array, built on the lunar farside near Daedalus Crater, which used laser amplifiers to focus photons through a series of lenses, then fire them as a high-power beam that could be aimed almost anywhere. Its target was a spacecraft with a 3,280-foot diameter solar sail and a 1,000 ton payload module tethered at its center. The photon beam would push against the sail and the beamship would be carried away. Once the vessel arrived at its destination, another beam projector would fire at the sail from the opposite direction, thus braking the ship and allowing it to enter orbit.

ConSpace hoped that, if the test program proved out, beamships would eventually

replace the nuclear-powered cycleships that traveled between Earth and Mars, with photon projectors erected on Deimos sending the ships back to Earth as well as decelerating them. The advantage was obvious; since beamships wouldn't have to carry their own fuel, their payload mass could be used almost entirely for passengers and cargo. It was also calculated that beamships could cut the average travel time between Earth and Mars from five months to one, thus allowing more ships to make the crossing at a fraction of the cost.

Before attempting anything so ambitious, though, the company had to make sure that the system actually worked. So ConSpace decided to send a prototype beamship to a target not quite as far from Earth as Mars, but even harder to reach: asteroid 2010 TK7.

2010 TK7 is an anomaly among near-Earth objects. Only about 1,000 feet in diameter, it occupies a Lagrange point nearly 60 degrees farther along Earth's heliocentric orbit, making it a tiny companion that precedes Earth as it travels around the Sun. Such Trojan asteroids are also located near Mars, Jupiter, and Neptune, but not until the early twenty-first century was it found that Earth had one of its own. Unlike other near-Earth asteroids whose orbits periodically take them behind the Sun, though, 2010 TK7 is never totally invisible from Earth. It always remains within sight, although its low albedo made it difficult for astronomers to find in the first place.

Even for a Trojan, 2010 TK7 is unusual. As it revolves around the Sun, the asteroid spirals around its orbital plane, with each oscillation taking a little more than a year to complete. Furthermore, this spiral is inclined about 21 degrees above and below the solar plane of ellipse. Imagine an old-fashioned Slinky toy that's been stretched out, pulled into a loop, then had its coils tilted sideways, and you get a rough idea of the asteroid's movement around the Sun.

This weird orbit means that the asteroid's distance from Earth varies greatly over time. During a 390-year period, 2010 TK7 is between .8 AU and 1.19 AU from Earth. Thus, its delta-*v*—the factor for its change of velocity—is about 9.4 kilometers per second; for those of us who don't talk like rocket scientists, this means that a ship would have to use up a lot of fuel to get there. Enough, in fact, to make a roundtrip prohibitive.

Since a beamship doesn't carry its own fuel, though, this wouldn't be a issue. The photon projector on the Moon would automatically track the asteroid, adjusting its aim so that the ship would remain on course. Once the ship arrived at the asteroid, its crew would erect an identical projector on its surface, thus allowing the vessel to return home the same way.

There wasn't much about 2010 TK7 that seemed to make the trip worth the effort. It appeared to be no more than a wad of rock; although there seemed to be ice deposits beneath the surface, spectral analysis hadn't revealed any metallic traces that would have lured asteroid miners. However, it was an ideal site for ConSpace to test its prototype beam-propulsion system, which was why the company was sending an experimental beamship, the *Achilles*, out there.

I sent the press release to the usual newsites and scheduled a press conference for the next day. Only three reporters showed up, and they were probably there for the coffee and doughnuts. I couldn't blame anyone for their lack of interest. An experimental propulsion system was hardly home-page news, no more or less important than anything else the company was doing at the time.

Achilles launched from lunar orbit on November 11, 2063, and arrived at 2010 TK7 about a month later. The beamship furled its sails, then fired descent engines and made a soft landing, firing pitons into the rocky terrain to anchor itself. Its five-member crew sent back a photo of themselves standing on its cinder-black surface,

with Earth a small blue-green orb hovering above the close horizon. The shot appeared on a couple of newsites as filler between that day's man-bites-dog stories. Another landmark in the human exploration of space. Whoopie.

Achilles remained on 2010 TK7 for almost two weeks. I wondered why the expedition stayed so long—someone in the engineering division told me that the beam projector and its solar array were largely preassembled and would only take a few days to erect—but I figured that the science department had some experiments that they wanted the crew to conduct. However, I noticed that the control center where the mission was being monitored was kept closed, with no one but a handful of personnel allowed inside. Not only that, but precious little information about the expedition was sent to the PR department. It was as if the company didn't want the public to know what was happening on 2010 TK7.

Which, in fact, they did not. It wasn't until after *Achilles* lifted off from the asteroid, though, none but a few people knew why.

I was one of the first to learn the truth. I was at my desk when Alberto Diaz called. Would I please come upstairs? This was the first time I'd heard from him in a couple of months, and I was beginning to wonder if he'd forgotten about me. Better late than never, though. I put down what I was doing and took the elevator to the top floor. His assistant was waiting for me; another offer of coffee, then she escorted me to an oak-paneled executive boardroom.

Alberto was seated at the far end of a long table, the only person in the room. Well, not exactly; he was only person *physically* in the room. Behind him was a massive wall screen, and on the screen, bigger than life, was Jerry Stone.

Jerry seemed to be staring straight at me, an amused smile upon his face. "We received this about twenty minutes ago," Diaz said, and that was when I realized that Jerry's image was a vid frozen in replay. "Sit down. You need to hear this."

I took a seat across the table from him. Diaz waved a hand above an embedded remote, and Jerry came to life. "*Hello, Paul. I assume Al has asked you to hear this, and that he obeyed my instructions to keep you in the dark until he heard directly from me. So now that you're here, let me tell you what's going on.*"

Jerry's hand moved forward; apparently he was sitting on a camp stool in front of a camera he was operating himself. The image pulled back a little, and now I saw that he was in a pressurized compartment: burnished steel walls, a couple of control panels, a ceiling handrail. A hardsuit dangled from a rack, its helmet upon a shelf above it.

"*Yes, I'm in space,*" Jerry said, "*but I'm not where you might think I'd be. Can you guess where? I'll give you a hint: I'm so far away that two-way conversation is impossible unless you'd care to wait seven or eight minutes to hear me reply to anything you might say.*" His smile became playful. "*And, no, I'm not on Mars.*"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Diaz watching me expectantly. I looked at him. "If he's not on Mars, then he must be . . ." And then I remembered *Achilles*. "Oh, no. You can't be serious. Tell me he's not . . ."

"*That's right.*" Jerry was keeping up his end of an imaginary conversation, but nonetheless I had the eerie feeling that he'd heard me. "*I'm on 2010 TK7. After I spoke with you, I left Earth the very next morning and boarded the Achilles two days later. No one except Alberto, the ship's crew, and a few ground controllers knew I was aboard. I didn't tell anyone else, not even the company directors. And in case you think this is a hoax . . .*"

Jerry stood up. There was just enough gravity to keep him seated so long as he remained still, but the momentum of getting up from his stool was enough to cause him to float upward. The camera tracked him as he rose to the low ceiling above him. "See? Not a gag. And if you're still not convinced . . ."

Still grinning, he grabbed hold of a handrail and pulled himself toward the camera. He disappeared behind it; a moment later, the image jiggled a little, then there was a soft snap as Jerry detached the camera from its mount. The image blurred as Jerry carried the camera toward a small porthole set in the center of a pressure door. His face was reflected in the glass for a second, then the view through the porthole sharpened as he focused the lens. Now we could see the asteroid surface; in the foreground were several cargo containers, apparently left behind by the *Achilles*, and farther away were the solar array and parabolic dish of the beam projector.

"Here's my new home," Jerry continued, off-camera. "I'm in the airlock, the only part that's above the surface. Before they left, I had the crew excavate the first four rooms of the underground shelter where I'll live. They left the laser drills and other excavation equipment, along with plenty of building material, so I'll be able to complete the project. It'll take a while to finish, but I'm calling it the Stone House."

The camera jiggled again as Jerry reattached it to the mount, then he reappeared. *"They've left me enough of food, water, and air to keep me alive for a couple of months, and I've arranged for unmanned beamships to regularly bring supplies from the Moon."* His expression became a little more serious. *"I don't want any visitors. I mean it. No one, repeat, no one has permission to come out here. If any other ship comes out this way, I won't give permission for it to land or let anyone through the airlock."*

Jerry didn't sit down, but instead stood in front of the camera. *"How long am I going to be here? I don't know. Maybe I'll be back in a few months. Maybe a few years. Or maybe never."* He shrugged. *"Believe me, I haven't done this without studying it carefully. If all goes well, I should be able to live here indefinitely. As for the obvious question . . ."*

He paused, looking away for a moment. *"Well, that's a little hard to explain. Let's just say that I'm sick of people and I want to get away for a while. I'm rich enough that I can do whatever I want, and this is what I want to do."*

The smile suddenly returned. He looked straight at the camera again. *"Anyway . . . well, there it is. Write a press release, call a press conference, do whatever you need to do. Any further communications will come straight from me to you. Your job is to be my surrogate . . . my eyes, ears, and mouth. If you or anyone else has questions, send me either a memo or a vid, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Alberto will take care of business while I'm gone, but you'll be my voice. Got it?"*

The smile faded. *"I guess that's about all for now. Let me know what the media says about all this . . ."* An abrupt laugh. *"No, on second thought, don't. They're a big reason why I'm doing this."* Another shrug. *"Keep in touch, all right? Merry Christmas, and so long . . ."*

He reached toward the camera. The screen went dark.

I let out my breath, then looked across the table at Diaz. Arms folded across his chest, he gazed back at me, his expression implacable. *"You knew he was going to do this?"* I asked, and he slowly nodded. *"Why?"*

"You heard him. He wants to get away from people." He shook his head. *"It's his money, his life. If that's what he wants to do . . ."*

He didn't finish the thought. He was curiously indifferent; apparently he thought Jerry's move was only temporary and that he'd return in a month or two. *"Yeah, well—"* I pushed back my chair—*"maybe I better get started on that press conference. The media is going to love this."*

"I'm sure they will." Diaz watched as I stood up. *"Just one thing: the next time you hear from him, let me know what he says before you go public with it, okay?"*

"Sure. But why . . .?"

"Maybe it's best that you do." He hesitated. *"Don't tell anyone I said this, but I'm not sure Jerry is still sane."*

* * *

That's what a lot of people said after the story broke.

The *Achilles* expedition had been minor news before I heard from Jerry, but it jumped to the big-font headlines after I put out the release. So many people showed up for the press conference, we had to move it to an auditorium, and forget the coffee and sinkers.

No one was interested in photon beam propulsion or even 2010 TK7. What they wanted to know was why one of the world's richest men had decided to become a hermit on an asteroid so far away that a Tibetan monastery would have been a Park Avenue penthouse by comparison. Jerry Stone had always been a figure of interest, but in recent years he'd faded from view; that changed the moment ConSpace revealed that he'd taken up residence on 2010 TK7.

As Jerry's spokesman, I was careful with what I told the media. I stuck to the essential details, giving them the first four of the five w's—who, what, when, and where—while staying clear of the fifth—why—as much as possible. I assured them that Jerry was still the company's president and CEO and that he would continue being involved with both day-to-day operations and long-range decision making. I showed them an edited portion of the vid he'd sent from the asteroid, carefully leaving out the part where he became vague about his return plans, and said that he was tired of dealing with the human race.

Alberto Diaz was in the room. He stood quietly off to one side, leaning against the wall as he silently watched me field questions from the press. I'd offered Alberto a chance to speak, but he didn't take it. He seemed content to let me be Jerry's ombudsman, and I was glad that he did. I hadn't yet made up my mind about Jerry's mental health, but I sure as hell didn't want a senior executive who thought the boss had gone off the deep end to be talking to the press.

The story hit the news sites and became an instant sensation. Across the entire width and breath of webspace, everyone weighed in with their opinions, informed or otherwise. By then, I'd moved to a new office, this time on the top floor, complete with my own window and a door I could shut whenever I pleased. I was no longer a cube gnome, but I paid for my newfound status with an increased workload; the first week, all I did was take care of interview requests. Those were easy to handle; Jerry wasn't interested in talking to anyone except me. What was more difficult was telling reporters why no one would be able to visit him even if they tried to hire a spacecraft pilot to carry them out to 2010 TK7. Try explaining orbital mechanics to someone who barely understands Newton's third law, and see how far that gets you.

Did people think Jerry had flipped out? Yep. In fact, that was the general consensus: Jerry Stone had gone mad, nuts, bonzo, bull goose crazy, or however you want to say it, and that was why he'd moved to a remote asteroid. I relayed the most pertinent commentary to the Stone House, yet Jerry didn't respond. No matter how stupid or unkind the remarks were, he kept himself above the fray, which was exactly what he should have done.

As usual, the story faded after about ten days or so. A movie star got caught in bed with someone who was neither his wife nor above the legal age of consent, and the celebrity kick-me sign was removed from Jerry's back. I continued to receive the occasional interview request, but otherwise my job became easier.

I was still Jerry's point man, though, which meant that all communications between him and ConSpace's various directors, division heads, and senior managers filtered through me. On a daily basis, I received an average of two dozen memos—at least half of them flagged *Urgent*—which needed to be sent to 2010 TK7. I'd forward them to the operations center, which would transmit them to ConSpace's deep-space communications network, which in turn would relay them to Jerry . . . and then everyone would sit back and wait for a reply. If we were very lucky, we'd get a re-

sponse within half an hour. That meant Jerry was reading his email and considered the issue to be important enough to warrant an immediate reply. Most of the time, though, we would have to wait hours, even days, to hear back from him . . . if at all. After a while, Jerry developed his own method of dealing with stuff he didn't consider to be worth his attention: cold silence. I'd ping him a couple of times, reminding him that he hadn't responded to a particular message, and then I'd have to go back to the person who sent the original memo and tell them that the boss wasn't interested in anything that they had to say. Think that's fun? Get your ear chewed off a few times by someone who obviously thinks you're an uppity little roadblock, and let me know if you still do.

Most of the time, Jerry's communiqués took the form of written memos, each signed with his digital signature. On occasion, though, I'd receive a vid, relayed straight to my office from the ops center. About three weeks after he moved to the asteroid, Jerry startled me by shaving his head; he explained that having hair was a nuisance in 2010 TK7'S almost nonexistent gravity, so he'd decided to get rid of it. Jerry had always been a charismatic person, but it was surprising to find just how much that depended on a full head of hair: bald, he looked like a monk. I tried to keep those pictures from going public, but they inevitably did, and they convinced a lot of people that Jerry had lost his mind.

His changed appearance was only his first surprise. The second came during the sixth vid he sent me. That was when a fogz showed up.

Jerry was in the midst of answering a question from the company's propulsion lab when a fuzzy red-and-white object floated between the camera lens and him. At first I thought it was a sweater, then it twisted around and I found myself staring at two brown eyes that mischievously regarded me from above a short canine muzzle.

It was a fox. Or at least that's what I thought it was. Startled, I recoiled from the screen at the same time that Jerry gently grabbed the animal by the long, soft-looking fur at the back of its neck.

"Reynard! Behave!" Jerry pulled the fox away from the camera. Its mouth stretched into a wily, sharp-toothed grin as it settled into the crook of Jerry's arm, its long white-tipped tail curling around his neck. "Sorry 'bout that," he said apologetically. "Sometimes they get in the way." Then he realized that I'd probably have no idea what he was holding. *"This is Reynard. He's one of three fogzes I've brought with me as companions. I kept them in biostasis until a few days ago. I wanted to make sure that the Stone House's life-support system was adequate for all four of us before I woke up Ren and Sylva as well."*

"That's nice," I murmured. I'd lately started talking to Jerry even though he couldn't hear me. "What the hell is a fogz?"

Reynard bent forward to lick Jerry's cheek. For all the world, he could have been a puppy. "Thanks, pal," Jerry said, his grin matching his pet's, as he shifted Reynard from one arm to the other. *"In case you're wondering . . . a fogz is my invention. Well, sort of. I asked the guys at a bioengineering company I own if they could give me a pet that would be suitable for microgravity. They chose the domesticated Russian fox. A little tinkering with its genome, and they came up with these guys. We call 'em fogzes . . . short for zero-g foxes."*

He let Reynard go, and I noticed for the first time that the fogz's legs were stunted while its tail was longer and bushier than usual. Reynard kicked off from Jerry and flagellated its tail to propel itself across the compartment. *"I've got two males and a female,"* Jerry said as he watched it go. *"None of them are neutered, so I expect that it won't be long before Sylva has kits. I'd offer to send you one . . . they're really sweet . . . but I don't think he or she would be happy on Earth. Too much gravity. But at least I'll have plenty of friends to keep me company."*

I was glad to hear that Jerry wasn't entirely alone out there. However, the fact that he was committed to raising generations of fogzes made me realize that he'd been fudging things a bit when he said that he might come home soon. This, and the fact that an unmanned cargo beamship was already scheduled to be launched from lunar orbit, hinted that Jerry was going to be out there longer than a few months.

This worried me, so I called Charles David, his personal physician. Charlie came over later that day and I showed him the vid I'd just received. He didn't say anything until it was over, then he sat back in his chair and let out his breath.

"How long has Jerry been out there?" he asked. "Be specific, if you can."

I checked my calendar. "Four months, two weeks, three days, and . . . um, call it twelve hours." I thought about it another moment, then added, "That's not counting the month or so it took the beamship to get him there."

"Okay . . . almost six months, total. That's not so bad. It takes cycleships six months to get to Mars, and their carousels don't spin the entire time. And the old American and Russian spacers used to live on the first space stations for up to two years, although they were usually in sad shape when they came home." He frowned. "But still . . . I'm worried about Jerry."

"I was afraid you might say that." I glanced at my office door to make sure it was closed. "If he stays out there too long . . ."

"It's going to affect his long-term health, yeah. Do you know if he's exercising regularly? I told him that he needed to spend at least an hour a day on the treadmill."

"I don't know. He's never mentioned it to me." In fact, in all the vids he'd sent me, I'd never seen a treadmill anywhere in the background. Perhaps one had been sent with him, but it looked like he'd never unpacked it.

"If he's not exercising daily, and he doesn't come home in another month or two, he'd need significant rehabilitation before he can walk again." Charlie hesitated. "And if he remains out there much longer than that, then his cardiovascular system will undergo significant deterioration. Bone calcium loss, muscle atrophy . . . sure, he may be able to stay alive indefinitely so long as he remains in low gravity and doesn't expose himself unnecessarily to cosmic radiation. But coming back to Earth could be fatal."

I didn't say anything for a second or two. In none of his memos or vids had Jerry given me any indication that he planned to leave 2010 TK7 any time soon. In fact, only the other day he'd sent me the final list of things that he wanted placed aboard the cargo ship. Along with a larger industrial-grade excavation drill and several pallets of building materials—he was planning to expand his subsurface living quarters, including an addition to his greenhouse—he'd requested sufficient food, water, and compressed air to get him through another six months. And aside from a modified powersat construction pod that he could use for station repair, he didn't have a spacecraft out there, or at least one capable of bringing him home.

"I'll remind him of that," I said. Charlie David might be Jerry's doctor, but I didn't want to risk telling him anything that could go public. One of the sleazier newsites had a standing offer of fifty thousand dollars for juicy info about Jerry—that's how the shaved-head pictures got out—and even a physician's confidentiality can be bought.

"Do that, please. At the very least, remind him to wear his biomonitor bracelet. I've tried to keep tabs on him, but he forgets to put it on in the morning."

Jerry went halfway with me. He began wearing the bracelet constantly. Returning to Earth, though, was another matter entirely.

The months went by, and Jerry Stone didn't come home. The months became a year, and Jerry stayed where he was. A year became two years, then three, then more . . . and by then it was obvious that 2010 TK7 had a permanent resident.

My place in ConSpace's upper management had become permanent as well. I was Jerry's proxy, his mouthpiece, his mannequin. My status was clarified by none other than Alberto Diaz, who abandoned his pretensions of civility shortly after I moved to the top floor. At first, when he visited my office, he'd begin by saying, "The next time you hear from Jerry, tell him . . ." After a while, though, it became, "Tell Jerry . . ." Eventually he rarely mentioned Jerry's name at all, instead simply speaking to me as if I was Jerry's eyes and ears and somehow expecting his message to be telepathically communicated to the boss. The next time I saw Alberto, he'd be expecting an answer: "What about that problem I talked to you about yesterday? Have you decided what to do . . .?"

Ironically, Jerry still had an office just down the hall. He'd seldom visited it even before he left Earth for the final time, but nonetheless it was the place where his executive assistant answered his mail, sent out memos in his name, and otherwise maintained the illusion that he was going to come strolling in any minute. She was eventually transferred to another department, but the office was still there; its door was closed but not locked, and every so often a custodian would come by to dust the place. If you walked in, you'd see evidence of his former presence. His pictures were on the walls, his mementoes were on the shelves, and there was even a sport coat hanging from a hook on the other side of the door. But the desk was clear of everything except an empty notebook and a phone, and its drawers contained nothing but company stationery and a few pens.

Jerry himself was gone. He'd literally disappeared from the face of the Earth, and as time went by, I heard from him less and less. I dutifully forwarded to him personnel memos, departmental reports, and the minutes of the annual stockholder meetings, and sometimes I'd get a response and sometimes I wouldn't. When he replied, it was usually a terse memo of his own, addressed either to an individual or a group, which I would then relay through the proper channels. As time went by, contact between Jerry and the company he'd founded became increasingly tenuous. ConSpace went about its business as usual, with its CEO an unseen oracle living in a temple on some faraway island.

Meanwhile, history moved on. There had always been rivalry between the Pax Astra and its independent competitors, the Transient Body Shipping Association, over economic control of the asteroid belt and the newly established Jovian colonies. The TBSA and the Jovian colonists eventually formed a secret alliance, the Zodiac, which began preying upon Pax vessels operating in the outer solar system. This caused political turmoil in the Pax, with the democratic New Ark Party losing control to neo-monarchists during a bloodless *coup d'état*. The Mars colonies seceded from the Pax shortly after Queen Macedonia's coronation and formed the Ares Alliance. War talk was in the air.

All this had an enormous impact on ConSpace. Its commercial alliance with the Pax Astra had relied upon the Mars colonies belonging to the Pax and the Pax remaining a democracy. When the Zodiac started attacking Pax spacecraft in the belt, it was ConSpace who had the most to lose; the majority of those ships belonged to the company. And because the monarchists never liked the cozy relationship between the Pax and ConSpace, one of the first things that Queen Macedonia's prime minister, Sir Lucius Robeson, did upon gaining power was to tear up all the existing contracts. This left the Ares Alliance and a handful of independent near-Earth space companies as ConSpace's major clients, and it was anyone's guess how long the Mars colonies would continue doing business with a corporation that had begun to bleed as badly as ConSpace did.

Things might have been different if Jerry was still around. He might have been able to negotiate a new agreement with the Pax monarchists, or even use back-chan-

nels to get in touch with the Zodiac and work out a truce with them. But he ignored all memos and reports telling him that everything was going to hell in a bucket, and the few times I spoke to him—which came down to about once every few weeks, and only when he called me—he preferred to chat about things like the wonderful roses he was cultivating in the greenhouse or how Sylva had just given birth to another litter of fogzes. He was happy, I'll say that for him . . . happier than he'd been in his last years on Earth. So long as the Zodiac didn't raid the Stone House—highly unlikely; 2010 TK7's eccentric orbit assured his privacy—he didn't seem to care what happened to his company.

His indifference wasn't mutual. The morning after a ConSpace freighter en route to Ceres was destroyed by a Zodiac raider, Alfredo Diaz marched into my office. He didn't bother to knock, but instead dropped a folder on my desk. Before I had a chance to pick it up, he sat down in a chair across from me.

"Tell Jerry he's fired," he said.

"Pardon me?"

"He's fired." Alberto propped his feet up on my desk and regarded me with smug little eyes. "The board of directors met this morning and took a vote, and they decided to replace him. He's no longer CEO . . . I am."

I stared at Alberto for a moment. So far as I could tell, he hadn't indulged himself in a martini breakfast, so I picked up the folder and opened it. Inside was a corporate resolution, signed by the board of directors and notarized by the company's legal counsel, formally dismissing Jerry Stone as president and chief executive officer of ConSpace.

"You can't do this," I said. "Jerry's the majority stockholder. . . ."

"Not any more, he's not." Alberto propped his chin upon his hand in the amused gesture of a chess master who'd just pulled a cunning move against an inexperienced novice. "Jerry's cash flow has become a bit tight lately. All the stuff he needs, the expense of shipping out there . . . it takes a lot of jack. He finally had to sell a few shares of company stock. Just enough to make ends meet, but—" a sly grin "—as soon as it came on the market, a friend of mine who works on Wall Street tipped me off and . . ."

"You bought him out."

"Yes, I did." He shrugged. "It wasn't much, really . . . but just enough that, once I added it to my portfolio, I was able to make a deal with the board's other principal shareholders. They're just as tired of putting up with him as I am, and we think we can turn the company around before it goes into the toilet."

"Maybe you can, or maybe you can't, but . . ."

"No, no . . . no 'buts' about it. Jerry's out. Tell him to pack his bags, we're bringing him home. Keeping him on that rock is a major drain on company finances and it's not earning us a dime." His smile became mean. "Then you can start cleaning out your desk, too."

"What? I . . ."

"You don't get it, do you?" Alberto still had his feet crossed on my desk; he deliberately shifted his right foot, toppling a ceramic mug my daughter had made for me that I used as a pen holder. The mug fell over, spilling pens and pencils across my desk. I reached forward to grab the mug before Alberto could kick it off my desk, and he snickered. "If he doesn't have a job here anymore, then neither do you. So pack up, you little worm. You're outta here."

I didn't respond. Anything I could have said would only have satisfied him. I'd pegged Alberto Diaz the moment I met him; he was a playground bully who'd never grown up. Maybe he'd been planning this the entire time, waiting for a chance to oust Jerry so that he and his cronies could take over ConSpace. Now his time had

come . . . and I knew that, if I wasn't careful, firing me would be only the first way he'd punish me for being loyal to Jerry.

So I waited until Alberto left, and then I opened a direct line to the Stone House. It took about ten minutes to tell Jerry what had just happened; when I was done, I flagged the vid *Urgent* and sent it on its way, and hoped that Jerry wasn't too busy playing with his fogzes to check his messages.

He wasn't. When I returned from the mail room with a couple of empty cardboard boxes, a red light was flashing on my desk screen: an incoming message from Jerry. I shut the door, sat down at the desk, and typed in my password. What I found was an encrypted text message, utilizing a private code that we used for high-priority business messages. I entered in a second password that deciphered the code, and in an instant the unscrambled message appeared on my screen:

Paul—Sorry this has happened. Hate to say it, but I've been expecting this for awhile.

Never really trusted D. Figured he'd stick a knife in my back sooner or later. Couldn't fire him from the board, though, because he has too much support (politics . . . ugh! one more reason why I left).

Anyway, I prepared for this. Go to my office and find my safe. It's behind the Mars painting. Enter the combination: Rats Live On No Evil Star. There's a minidisk in there. Don't read it. Just take it to BK. He'll know what to do.

Sit tight. Don't worry. Everything will be fine.—J

I deleted the message and erased it from the memory buffer, then got up and, as casually as I could, sauntered down the hall to Jerry's office. Several empty boxes were stacked beside the door—Alberto obviously wasn't wasting time—but no one was inside.

Hanging above the couch was an original Eggleton of a martian landscape that Jerry had once purchased in a Sotheby's auction. I'd often admired the painting, but never dreamt that it might hide anything. Yet it did; the painting was mounted on a hinged door that opened silently when I moved the frame, revealing a wall safe with an alphanumerical keypad recessed within its chrome steel door.

I typed in the first letters of the palindrome and the safe popped open. Inside were stock certificates, several letters, a small metal box that I didn't open, and enough bundled cash to pay a CEO's kidnap ransom. The minidisk lay on top of the cash.

I have to admit, for a moment or two my own loyalty was tested. I could have taken the money and trashed the minidisk, and no one would have been the wiser. What could Jerry have done—fire me? Any temptation I might have felt to betray Jerry, though, lasted only a second. Jerry had always been good to me, while Alberto had screwed both of us the first chance he had. So I slipped the disk into my shirt pocket, closed the safe, and covered it with the painting again.

BK was Benny Klein, Jerry's personal attorney and also one of his closest friends. His office was only four blocks away; I caught a rickshaw cab and was there in fifteen minutes. I didn't call ahead—it was possible that Alberto might have the company security team tapping my phones—but Benny let me see him without an appointment. I handed him the minidisk, told him what was going on at ConSpace and how Jerry had instructed me to deliver the disk to him, and then left.

I had no idea what was on the disk. All I knew was that Benny made good use of it. By the end of the day, Alberto Diaz was gone, as were three members of the board of directors. All four resigned immediately, after issuing a joint statement saying that they were leaving to pursue new careers outside the space industry.

However, Alberto's attempted palace coup was successful to some degree. A week after it happened, Jerry sent me a brief memo, announcing that he'd decided to step down as president and CEO of ConSpace.

* * *

I asked him why, of course, but his response was brief and uninformative: *Because I want to* was the gist of it. When Jerry didn't want to answer a question, that was the best reply one was likely to get; silence was his usual response.

I did as I was supposed to do. I called Alberto's successor, another board member who'd not been jettisoned during the purge, and let him know that he was in for another surprise. This fellow convened the remaining directors in the executive board room, where I gave them Jerry's memo. Once they picked themselves off the floor, they sent Jerry a letter demanding an explanation.

Jerry must have been waiting for them to call back, because his reply was received within minutes. This time, he sent a vid. He was seated in his greenhouse, wearing a linen dashiki and surrounded by tomato vines and green algae tanks, a silver-and-black fogz nestled in his arms. Although his head was still shaved, lately he'd let his beard grow out. To me, he appeared to be his normal self—relaxed, smiling, unconcerned with such trifles as the leadership of a major corporation—but when I looked at him through the eyes of the board members, I saw a wealthy eccentric whose mind had slipped its last tenuous grip on sanity.

"Good day, gentlemen," he said, gently stroking the fogz in his arms. *"I appreciate your prompt response to the memo I sent Paul earlier today. I also appreciate your concern, especially since it follows hard on the heels of last week's misadventure."*

Some of the directors looked askance at each other. The company had undergone a major crisis, and he called it a "misadventure." Jerry went on. *"However, recent events have led me to realize something that I've suspected for a while now . . . that my absence has become detrimental to the company's future, and that ConSpace needs a chief executive who is actually on Earth, if not in Houston."*

The fogz—Ren, if I wasn't mistaken—yawned indolently as Jerry's hands continued to stroke his plush fur. *"However, I have no desire to return to Earth. My home is here, and I don't wish to leave it. So I'm willing to make an agreement with the board. I will step down as president and CEO, and also sell all but 10 percent of my remaining stock in the company. In return, the company will respect my status as founder and president emeritus by continuing to support my residence here on 2010 TK7, including sending any necessary supplies that I might need . . ."*

He suddenly snapped his fingers, as if remembering something. *"Oh, yes . . . another thing or two. I wish to remain alone and undisturbed . . . but I'd like to have Paul Lauderdale continue as my private spokesman, with the company paying his salary."* He smiled. *"Over the last few years, I've come to rely on Paul, and the events of last week have proved that my trust hasn't been misplaced . . . unlike a few other individuals I could mention, that is."*

A couple of people coughed while others averted their gaze. Although Alberto and three other directors had been the instigators of the attempted coup, the fact remained that everyone in the room had signed the declaration that attempted to terminate Jerry's employment. I didn't know why they were still there—maybe because Jerry didn't have anything on them—but I was the only person present who hadn't stood by while Alberto and his cohorts tried to stick a knife in his back. I was suddenly proud of myself for not succumbing to temptation. My conscience was clear, even if theirs were not.

"In any case, I'm no longer interested in running ConSpace, and I wish to hand over the reins to someone who is. I'll leave it up to you to choose my successor and arrange for the legal transfer of corporate authority." A quiet smile. *"I'm looking forward to hearing from you soon."*

The vid ended. There was a long moment of silence. And then everyone sitting around that long oak table breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The board of directors agreed to Jerry's terms, of course. Which they did as soon as Jerry put his electronic signature on a stack of forms. Not surprisingly, the new boss was one of their own, a likeable but unimaginative drone who promised not to take any risks while leading ConSpace back to its glory days.

The company also agreed to keep me on retainer as Jerry's spokesman. My salary remained the same, and my only duty would be to keep open lines of communication between ConSpace and its founder. But the new CEO soon made it clear that he no longer wanted me in the executive suite; I could keep my position, but not my office.

It was just as well that the company let me go. Within a few years, ConSpace was bankrupt. The Pax Astra had no further need for them and neither did the Ares Alliance. The new CEO's patter about fresh approaches was empty talk; now its visionary-in-residence was gone, the company had nothing new to offer. ConSpace's stock was eventually bought by a holding company, which carved up the assets and sold them off at fire-sale prices.

I often wondered whether Jerry saw this coming. I wouldn't be surprised if he had.

Fortunately, his severance agreement remained legally binding, as did mine. By then, I'd moved to Reno, bought a place in the mountains overlooking the city, and set up a boutique public-relations consulting firm. My ConSpace pension was sufficient that I really didn't need any other clients, yet I had to have someone other than Jerry to keep me busy. In time, I repped everyone from artists to scientists—no politicians; I was done with them—but Jerry remained my primary concern.

With ConSpace no longer part of his life, Jerry became less indifferent to messages from home. I remained his gatekeeper, but he began to send more letters back to Earth, most of them private email to friends and family he'd left behind. He and I talked more frequently as well. We'd learned how to cope with the long radio delay by jotting down notes about what the other person was saying, cribbing from those notes while transmitting a reply, then putting around for a few minutes until the other guy repeated the cycle at his end. The same system was used when we started playing board games. Chess was our favorite pastime, but we also learned how to play Battleship and Monopoly the same way, with games sometimes lasting several weeks.

I never had the impression that Jerry was lonely. He'd picked this way of living with his eyes wide open, and although he never spoke openly of his reasons for becoming a hermit, it was obvious that he'd become tired of the human race and wanted to have little to do with anyone besides his fogzes. But it wasn't hard to tell that, at times, he suffered from homesickness. He'd speak of suiting up and going out the airlock, just to stand on the asteroid surface and look at Earth, a bright blue orb that hung in the star-filled sky as 2010 TK7's eternal companion. He could easily cover Earth with an outstretched thumb, but he didn't; that would have been like blotting out everyone and everything that he'd left behind, and he didn't want to do that.

Yet there was no question that his exile had become permanent. Even if he wanted to return to Earth, going back was no longer an option. He'd been on the asteroid for so long that Earth's gravity would have killed him, and even if he'd tried to take up residence in a lunar colony, he would have been little more than a cripple. We briefly discussed the idea of him relocating to a space station in Earth orbit, but he didn't like the prospect of spending the rest of his life, as he put it, "kicking around in a tin can."

On 2010 TK7, he'd made a good life for himself. Over the years he gradually expanded the Stone House's underground maze of tunnels and rooms until it had almost as much squarefootage as any of the homes he'd owned on Earth. Once he'd tapped into subsurface ice deposits and installed pumps, filters, and pipes, he had

an almost-inexhaustible supply of fresh water. And his greenhouse was amazing; his vegetable gardens could have fed a dozen guests, and in low gravity the ivy and honeysuckle vines he'd cultivated had spread outward into the tunnels, clinging to the rock walls and lending his home a leafy appearance much like the walls of a country manor.

A writer for a prestigious and well-established magazine—print, not electronic—approached me to ask if he could interview Jerry for a profile. By then, Jerry had been living on 2010 TK7 for nearly 25 years. ConSpace was long gone, and even Alberto Diaz was dead, having suffered a fatal stroke a few years earlier. I took the writer's proposal to Jerry, and after some discussion he agreed to an in-depth interview. Charlie David was still Jerry's doctor, though, and he was concerned that his patient might no longer have natural immunity to any germs or viruses the reporter could carry into Jerry's home. So the interviews were conducted long-distance, although Jerry cheerfully agreed to carry a camera around the Stone House so that the writer could see where he lived.

The interviews were conducted over three days, and the writer touched on just about everything, from how Jerry had made his fortune to his former playboy life to the possible social anxiety disorders that led him to seek solitude. Jerry was as candid as I'd ever known him to be, perhaps even more. He addressed a persistent rumor that he wasn't, in fact, in space at all, but instead was living on a remote island in the South Pacific and had been faking the whole asteroid thing the entire time. Jerry settled that by turning upside-down, pulling a small rubber ball from his pocket, and playing fetch with a couple of fogz kits.

Yet he remained evasive about why he'd moved to 2010 TK7 when, as the writer pointed out, it would have been easier for him to build a private habitat on the far side of the Moon. When that question came up, Jerry's smile became enigmatic. "*I came out here because I could,*" he said. "*I had my reasons . . . let's just leave it at that.*"

The article that came out of the interviews was published a couple of months later. It was a good piece that earned the writer a Pulitzer nomination, but it was also the last time Jerry spoke publically. He clammed up once again, and stayed that way.

If Jerry had returned to Earth, or at least Earth orbit, he would have witnessed the changes that occurred during the last seventeen years of his life. He would have seen Queen Macedonia's death and King Lucius's coronation, and his subsequent declaration of war against the Ares Alliance. He would have watched as the System War raged from Venus all the way to Titan, not ending until the Treaty of Ceres ceded Callisto to the Pax Astra and Saturn's moons to the Alliance. He would have seen the rise of *homo superior*, the so-called googles, and how they came to dominate the outer solar system. He would have seen the mysterious Pasquale Chicago transform another asteroid, 4442 Garcia, into a generation ship, its flight beyond our solar system commencing just after the turn of the new century. And in 2102, if he'd cared to do so, he could have celebrated the collapse of the Pax Astra shortly after King Lucius' death.

Jerry was around for all this, but I don't think he noticed anything that happened beyond his own little rock. I sent him a news digest every day, but I think he seldom opened it, let alone read it. When he spoke to me, he spoke as an old man whose outlook hadn't changed in decades. So far as I could tell, he'd stopped paying attention to . . . well, just about everything . . . around 2085, and didn't give a damn anyway.

It might have been just as well that he'd remained a recluse all the way to the end. The truth of the matter is, Jerry Stone no longer had anything to contribute. The age of the space tycoon was over. Humankind had not only come to inhabit most of the

solar system, but had also made the first steps to the stars beyond, and the twenty-second century had no place for either emperors or entrepreneurs. Even his most daring innovation, the beam-propulsion system, was a relic of the past, a technology that never went into mass production.

Jerry Stone had nothing left to offer anyone. Or so it seemed.

I spoke to him less and less during his last years. I made sure that he continued to receive regular cargo shipments even though he told me that he was completely self-sufficient, and occasionally sent him a letter telling him what I was doing now that I was retired and enjoying the life of a geriatric desert rat. I didn't get much from him in return, but I'd come to expect that. For me, he became just another old guy I knew, just a little more crazy than most.

And then one morning, I got a call from the deep-space communications center in Texas that I'd hired to monitor Jerry's bracelet, informing me that all his vital signs had flatlined. I'd been anticipating this day for quite some time, so I wrote his obituary and sent it to all the major news sites, and then I had a shot of whisky in honor of my dead friend.

That might have been the end, but it wasn't. A few days later, I got a call from an attorney in Benny Klein's old law firm. Benny was long gone, of course, but his firm was representing Jerry's estate. I was told that Jerry's relatives were planning to hire people to travel out to 2010 TK7 and retrieve his body. They weren't doing this just to give him a decent funeral; in order to properly execute Jerry's will to the satisfaction of the probate court, they needed to have someone come along who could identify the corpse and ascertain that it was Jerry's. Since I was the only person who'd been in regular contact with him during the last years of his life, I was the obvious choice.

I agreed to make the trip. The Stone family was offering generous compensation—after all, they had much to gain from Jerry's estate, which was still worth billions—but that wasn't the only reason. I figured that I owed it to my friend to see that he was treated well. And besides, I was curious. What had he been doing while living without physical human contact for more than forty years? I wanted to know.

A doctor gave me a thorough examination and pronounced me fit for a long space voyage, provided that my vessel provided me with artificial gravity for most of the journey. So an old Mars cycleship was refitted with a solar sail, then launched via photon beam toward 2010 TK7. I endured the voyage about as well as could be expected for a seventy-year-old guy who'd left Earth only twice in his life, and a little more than four weeks later the ship rendezvoused with the Trojan asteroid.

Once we decelerated and made orbit with the asteroid, I joined the three crewmen who boarded an orbital ferry. After a reconnaissance fly-by, we located the airlock node installed by the original construction crew. Ironically, this was the same place that Jerry had sent his first transmission. The pilot was able to dock directly with the node, and once he ascertained that there was an atmosphere on the other side of the hatch, we entered the airlock. This was the front door of Jerry's home; I couldn't help but feel as if we should have rung a doorbell, or at least wiped our feet on the mat.

A half dozen fogzes were waiting for us on the other side of the hatch. A couple of them growled and bared their teeth, looking for all the world like guard dogs wary of unexpected guests, but the others yip-yapped and spun their tails in joy. Apparently they had some means of feeding themselves without Jerry's help. For a second, I was afraid that they might have been dining on their master's body, but then I remembered that they were vegetarians and that Jerry had once mentioned having rigged an automatic dispenser for their kibble.

A couple of surprises awaited us as we made our way through the underground

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habitat. One was that there were more fogzes here than I'd ever suspected. Every time we entered a room or tunnel, another two or three animals were already there. I tried to keep count, but gave up after a while; eventually, we'd discover that two dozen fogzes lived in the asteroid. The air had a canine reek barely masked by the sweet smell of honeysuckle, but I suppose you could get used to it after a while, particularly if mutant foxes were your only companions for 42 years.

The other surprise was just how large the Stone House had become. We went in there expecting a handful of rooms and a large hydroponics greenhouse, not to mention maintenance facilities. What we found instead was room after room after room carved out of solid rock, dozens in all, connected to one another by a labyrinthine network of tunnels. The tunnels were bored deep into the mantle and seemed to lead in all six axial directions, and were lighted by fiberoptic cables that brought underground sunlight captured on the surface. Honeysuckle had spread through the tunnels and into the rooms, clinging to the rock walls as a dense, leafy shroud. It was easy to get lost in there, so mazelike the asteroid's interior had become.

This was what Jerry had spent four decades doing: using laser drills to carve out the inside of 2010 TK7, the way a worm chews through the inside of an apple while leaving its skin intact. There were more rooms than any one person could possibly use; in fact, only the four rooms originally made for him by the *Achilles* crew had ever been inhabited. The rest were vacant except for fogzes, who played among the vines like happy children.

Except for the largest room. That was where we found Jerry.

In death, he floated in the very place where gravity would have no hold upon him: at the asteroid's core, within the center of a spherical chamber sixty feet in diameter. The fiberoptic light, filtered by the honeysuckle vine, cast autumnal shadows across the body that hung in midair, arms and legs limp, head slightly bowed. Jerry had let his hair grow out in the last years of his life, and like his beard it had gone a very pale shade of grey. He'd become mummified, but otherwise he was well preserved.

When I found him, I saw that his eyes were open, and he seemed to gaze in sightless wonder at something which, in his last moments of life, had given him reason to smile ever so slightly.

I had little doubt that he'd come here to die. Fogzes played around us as I gazed at him for a very long time, all too aware that, after so many years, this was the first time we'd ever met face to face. *Hello, old friend*, his expression seemed to say. *How good to meet you at last.*

Jerry had become sick of people, but he'd never given up on the human race. So he'd left us to go off and make a world of his own, then spent the rest of his life turning his home into a place we could inhabit when he was gone. His fortune went to his relatives, but the Stone House was bequeathed to everyone on the distant world he could always see but would never walk upon again. This was stipulated in his will; the Stone House is inhabited to this day, mainly by eccentrics—writers, artists, sculptors, dreamers—who just want to get away for a while.

Was he a madman or a visionary? For some people, I'm not sure there's really a difference. ○

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ZIP

Steven Utley

Steven Utley is the author of the story collections *Ghost Seas*, *The Beasts of Love*, and *Where or When*. The first volume of his Silurian tales, *The 400-Million-Year Itch*, will be issued under the Ticonderoga imprint in 2012. Steven lives in Tennessee but tells us he would much rather be in Austin, Texas. The author's last story for us, "The Point," appeared in February 2009. He returns to our pages now with a brief look at the hidden perils of time travel.

Grass the color of old bones bends before a wind that comes carrying a scent of rain and the feel of ice. *Megatheria* browse among trees a hundred yards away, three of the beasts, two adults and a youngster. The larger adult is about the size of a bungalow, or so it seems. They are such great lumbering ludicrous beasts that I find myself feeling kindly toward them. Their shaggy coats of reddish-blond hair, though matted with mud, leaves, twigs, and God alone knows what else, irresistibly remind me of my wife. Only a few hours have passed since I said goodbye to her, and already it is a million years ago. A million years, anyway, in some direction from now.

We have stopped, Plant and Chernikowski and I, in a Pleistocene season, spring or perhaps even summer in a subarctic region. How warm, I wonder, how really summery, could a Pleistocene summer have been? And I correct myself: how warm can it be?

Plant and Chernikowski are frantically running through the systems checks they frantically ran through before, when the machine first came to premature rest probably somewhere in modern-day Iraq, probably in pre-Sumerian time. I saw a collection of huts in the distance; close by, however, were people harvesting grain, small but robust men and women, brown as teak. They reacted predictably to the sudden and unexpected appearance of a huge strange object practically in their midst: they ran away. Unpredictably, they ran only about half a mile before stopping, turning, and drifting back to settle down where they could watch us watch them through the observation blister. They'll erect a whole religion on this incident, I thought at the time.

Then I saw the sky and the earth dissolve into each other all around the rim of the horizon, and the leading edge of dissolution swung scythe-like through the watchers, cutting them down, cutting them *up*. They had no chance to react, to realize that now something even more unusual was happening, before they and their valley were rendered down apparently to molecules, possibly down to the constituent atoms or even the infinitesimal sparks and murmurs constituting atoms, all to the accompaniment, a second or two after the machine had begun to move again, of a great flash of light.

What was that, what was that flash? Plant said, his voice uncharacteristically small and frightened.

And Chernikowski slowly replied, after some obvious consideration, I think that may have been everything coming apart in a great hurry.

An argument ensued, and Plant and Chernikowski are still having it. When the time machine was first activated, Chernikowski speculates, we were shifted out of our proper spacetime matrix into the antimatter universe, and what we have witnessed is the reciprocal annihilation of matter and antimatter.

If such a shift has occurred, Plant argues, annihilation should spread outward from the point of contact, not close in on it the way we watched it do. And it would happen too quickly to register on human senses. This was so slow—the valley people watched us for over an hour, even sent someone running to their village to bring more people out to watch us, before the world ended.

Somewhere, Chernikowski says, in our own spacetime matrix, something is caught, snagged, so that as we traveled backward, it created tension between ourselves and the snag, thereby causing the fabric of spacetime to unravel as though it were a bit of knitting.

Perhaps it is a bit of knitting, I think.

Plant, however, glares at Chernikowski, disgusted. This is spacetime we're talking about, not an old sweater!

I tried at first to contribute to the discussion by making what struck me as a perfectly reasonable suggestion: Perhaps if we simply went back to our own time and found out what the problem is—

Each regarded me with the same openly contemptuous look. That look said, You're some anthropologist or some *earth*-sciences type, you're supercargo, you're only along for the ride and utterly damn useless in this situation so please just shut the hell up.

Chernikowski, at least, still deigns to speak to me. He says, I believe our own spacetime matrix no longer exists. At least not as it used to exist. We can't go back to it because it's no longer there for us to go back to. Something like that, anyway.

Under what pass for normal circumstances the time machine looks like a lopsided dumbbell. At present—"at present!"—in spite of the gravity of the situation, I am still capable of appreciating how inadequate language is when faced with the task of describing time travel—at *present*, the larger end of the dumbbell is supposed to work as an anchor for the smaller end, which is here, now, in this wilderness. At present, however, the anchoring end seems not to be anywhere.

Whatever has happened, I say, we have to do something.

That hands the argument back to Plant and Chernikowski and permits me both to save face and withdraw to the sidelines and let them get on with it. Perhaps if we do this, one says. Perhaps if we do that, the other says. There has to be a way to make time run in the right direction again. Plant means, of course, a way to make time run forward. The very existence of the time machine proves there is no right direction in which time may run.

I do not have to be a physicist, and I certainly am not one, to recall Einstein's words: "The distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubborn, persistent illusion."

Chernikowski says, Time is not running backward. Cause still precedes effect. What's happening is that time is unraveling from the future backward toward the past.

And the three of us are running ahead of it. This apparently is the only way for us to keep from being unraveled along with everything else, if indeed that is what would happen to us. Each time, we have gone farther, faster. Is there a limit, I wonder, to how fast we can go? A million years a minute? Ten million? A hundred mil-

lion? Longer, really, than the human mind can begin to imagine, but less than an eyeblink in a planetary lifetime. One thousand million years is—I perform what is, for me, lightning-swift mental calculation—perhaps one twelfth or thirteenth or fifteenth or even eighteenth the age of the universe, one fifth the age of the planet, one tenth of the Earth's life expectancy—at least, if Chernikowski is right, before we began shortening it.

Whatever we end up doing, Chernikowski suddenly says, we have got to get going *now*, and points, and I feel a chill as though a cold, clammy hand has been pressed against my back, high, between the shoulder blades. The sky is dissolving or—whatever it is doing exactly, it is going away.

The time machine hums and just before it goes I see the oblivious *Megatheria* and just as the machine goes, I see the flash again. The light fades, or is left behind, or—suddenly my eyes are wet, a sob wracks me. I am never going to get home. I am never going to see my wife again.

I say, in a voice Plant and Chernikowski cannot ignore, We're zipping along here on our way across twelve or fifteen billion years to the Big Bang. (You don't have to be a physicist to know about the Big Bang, either.) After a point, I tell them, if we don't get tired or bored or go bugshit insane long before then, if we don't just stop and wait for annihilation to catch up with us—we simply won't dare to stop.

What, says Chernikowski, what do you mean?

We'll just have to keep going, all the way back, all the way back to God only knows what. Take into consideration the matter of changing conditions. Seas rise and fall, atmospheric composition changes, the crust cracks, trembles, shifts. Go back far enough, and it ceases to be crust at all. Then there's the matter of conditions before there even was an Earth. Do we just hang in space, until everything in the universe contracts into the infinitesimal point of beginning? Do we go into that point ourselves, and come back out, or go on through, or what?

I don't know, Plant confesses bleakly, and I can't imagine. How big can this phenomenon be?

How *big*? I echo. I think of my wife and all the virtues she embodied and everything else I knew and cared about back in the world and the future that are now lost, probably irrevocably, the present that will surely begin unraveling all around us at any moment, the past stretching back through four and a half billion years of Earth history and then through another dozen or so billion years all the way back to the Big Bang, and I say, Good God in Heaven, Plant, how *big* does it have to be?

There's another possibility, Chernikowski says. What if we don't run? What if our, our motion, our being in transit is what's unraveling spacetime? Maybe spacetime is somehow, you know, *snagged* on the time machine—when we go back, we simply widen the tear.

The goddamn sweater analogy again! Plant snaps, his voice full of contempt.

In this situation, Chernikowski replies, the sweater analogy is as suitable as any other. So. What if we stop here, wait to see what happens when the wave of annihilation actually touches us?

Probably, says Plant, we just get annihilated along with everything else.

But what if, instead, the wave stops where and when we stop? Stops and recedes, and then time begins to move forward again, from that point at which we stopped?

What if, Plant snarls, all of us here who believe in fairies clap our hands and make everything better?

Do you mean, I ask Chernikowski, that when time begins to move forward again, everything is as it was before? The same events? The same people? Down to the smallest detail?

Chernikowski shrugs. Who knows? If all causes and effects up to this instant are

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the same, shouldn't the same consequences from this instant onward follow from them? Fixed and immutable?

This isn't my sphere of expertise, I remind him.

If, if! says Plant. What if it's a matter of probabilities? It may have been probable, let's say, that those ground sloths and those farmers would exist, but maybe it wasn't certain they would. Assuming we don't fly apart into atoms when the wave hits us, assuming we can still get the time machine headed back to our proper matrix . . . what if our proper temporal matrix no longer exists? No, what if it never existed at all? We could find ourselves stuck in a world where, where the dominant lifeform is descended from squirrels or, or cats, or centipedes.

Plant, Chernikowski says warningly, don't be absurd.

Absurd? This whole situation isn't already absurd? And now you're talking about just sitting around waiting to be disintegrated?

Chernikowski indicates me with a nod. You heard what he said, he tells Plant. We can run before this wave of destruction, but eventually we find ourselves on a molten proto-planet. If we survive that, we drift around in a cloud of dust and gas. Or maybe we catch the blast of the supernova that created the dust and gas. Eventually, we get to the Big Bang. Or *before* the Big Bang—maybe we find ourselves sucked into the primordial singularity along with everything else. The point is, we can run from the wave, but there's nothing to run to. No refuge. No hiding place.

That's why, I say, I'm getting off here.

Plant scowls. What do you mean, getting off?

If you go back farther in time, I won't go with you. The world is a wilderness during this Pleistocene interglacial, but at least it's still a familiar world. Grass, trees, flowers. Bears and antelope and horses. And hominids. Perhaps even humans.

And big hairy elephants, Plant says, and giant wolves, and sabretooth tigers. The Pleistocene isn't a petting zoo.

I realize that, Plant. It's more like Africa before Europeans invaded it. Utterly wild and untamed and altogether dangerous. But at least it isn't completely strange. You can almost imagine that you're in the Wisconsin backwoods. The farther back you go, the stranger everything is going to become. Dinosaurs, flying reptiles, giant insects. Giant everything. No thanks. I'm getting off here and hoping for the best.

As commander of this mission, Plant tells Chernikowski, you can't permit that.

Chernikowski nods and says to me, I am responsible for you. I'm responsible for all of us.

Then act responsibly. Do what you yourself suggested. We make our stand here and see what happens.

Oh, no, Plant says. *I'm* not resigned to whatever happens. As long as we stay a step or two ahead of the wave, we've still got a chance to figure this thing out. Waiting here to see what happens—no. I'm not willing to gamble like that.

I ignore Plant and address myself to Chernikowski. Given these untoward circumstances, I tell him, your responsibility for me is ended. I hereby relieve you of it. If you choose to go back farther in the time machine, I'm not going with you.

You *can't* stay here by yourself.

That's why I'm hoping you and Plant will stay, too. You yourself said that it could be the time machine itself that's causing the problem. It's my uneducated opinion that you may be right. Assuming the time machine is the cause of the problem, that it's ripping apart the fabric of being, I say let it stay right where it is, let us stay right where we are, and see what happens.

We know what happens, says Plant, we're disintegrated, that's what happens. No, thank you!

Running, Chernikowski says, we only delay the inevitable. But maybe it isn't in-

evitable. Maybe if we park the time machine here, the wave stops here, too. Maybe then we can use the machine to return to our own time. Maybe it *hasn't* been wiped out. Maybe it's still there, waiting for us to find our way back.

That's way too much maybe for me, says Plant.

Well, it's certain that if we keep going, the wave will simply follow us.

You two work it out between yourselves, I put in. I'm going outside.

Stop him! Plant yells.

Chernikowski answers, but the hatch closes behind me before I can get any sense of his reply. The Pleistocene evening is clear and calm and cool. I walk about fifty yards away from the time machine, through knee-high grass, and am astonished by my own lack of fear. Plant was right about the dangers infesting this world—sabre-toothed cats, dire wolves, bears the size of a rhinoceros, rhinos the size of elephants. But those are comprehensible threats, unlike the scattering of one's atoms by a force or forces beyond my understanding. If I am to die in Pleistocene time, at least I die within half a million years of everything that's important to me, my wife, my world. Shivering in the dusk, I find myself wishing that I could listen to something by Mozart. The brief, checkered, ludicrous history of my species has never been so precious to me as it is now.

Behind me, the hatch of the time machine opens, and Chernikowski and Plant emerge. Their expressions are grim; Plant, in particular, looks as though he can barely contain his rage at Chernikowski and me for placing him in this position, at himself for allowing us to place him in this position. Still, he follows Chernikowski through the hatch, and as I turn to greet them he says to me, If this doesn't work out, I hope I have just enough time to knock your block off.

If we're annihilated, I reply, it won't matter, and if we aren't, then I'll happily let you knock my block off. As long as we're still alive. As long as we still have a chance of returning to our proper matrix.

We wait in the cooling dusk, and after a few minutes Chernikowski whistles softly, and Plant and I say, in unison, What?

Just whistling, says Chernikowski.

I recognized it, I tell him. The first several notes of Beethoven's Ode to Joy.

Weird choice, says Plant. Wouldn't a dirge be more appropriate?

I didn't even think about it, says Chernikowski. It just came out.

If the wave comes and we're still here when it passes, I say, well, you know, there are people in Pleistocene time.

If this is Pleistocene time, says Plant. We may have slipped back even farther. Into the Pliocene or even the Miocene.

Well, if it is Pleistocene time, if there are modern or even only semi-modern human beings here, we could find them. We could teach them so much.

They could be headhunters, Plant says, or cannibals.

They could be more afraid of us than we are of them. We could be the first shamans in the world.

Or, says Plant, the first people ever to get mugged in the dark.

Our eyes are trained on the indefinite horizon. It's difficult to tell what is happening out there along the edge of earth and sky, but, suddenly, something certainly is happening out there—a swirling, roiling darkness within the darkness, a scattering of the meager light.

I hear the sharp intake of someone's breath, Plant's or Chernikowski's, and someone else says, in a voice tinged with awe, Here it comes, I hope to hell we know what we're doing, and I brace myself for whatever in fact comes.

We could be the first men in the world, I murmur, or the last. ○

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BIRD WALKS IN NEW ENGLAND

Michael Blumlein

Michael Blumlein is the author of many novels and stories, including his recently completed novel, *The Domino Master*. His second collection of stories, *What the Doctor Ordered: Tales of the Bizarre and the Magnificent*, will be coming out this autumn. Michael tells us, " 'Bird Walks in New England' was inspired by the book of the same name, many such walks, and the love of a woman."

I followed my boyfriend to the city because I was in love with him. He had come to fetch me from across the country, like a knight riding in for his damsel. He had dark and curly hair. My family is fair, and there was something about his darkness, something sharp and sexy and wild, that told me I had to be with him. Silently, I pledged that I would make this happen. I would say yes to him. I know how to say yes, just as I know how much people like to be pleased. I have seen it my entire life, to the extent that I have become an expert in the art of pleasing and wanting to please. Such an expert that long ago I managed to combine its two components, the art of pleasing others and the art of pleasing oneself, so that the two became one to me. How odd to discover, many years later, that the two were not one. That the two, in fact, were in conflict. Or could be in conflict. That in a world where there seemed no limit to pleasing and being pleased, in a world of plenty there still could be scarcity. But I get ahead of myself.

I pledged that I would be with my knight. I would ride side by side with him atop my horse, or if necessary, I would sit on his steed, hands clasped around his waist behind him. Both positions suited me, and I sensed that both would suit him, and I also sensed that if I asked, he would agree to ride, hands clasped, behind me. This (and so much else) intrigued me about him. His looks, his cocksure attitude, his high and sometimes stormy spirit. He was bold and armored, but unlike other knights, or potential knights, I had known, he was not afraid to shed his armor. In fact, he loved to shed it—shed everything—and come to me. He feasted on me, and I feasted on him. In the early days before Melissa, we were gluttons for each other. We ate greedily and often. And we talked. Oh, how we talked. Such rhapsodies! Such songs! And we read together. And took walks. And when we were apart, we ached to be together, and we wrote each other of the minutiae of our aches and longings each and every day.

The dawn of love: is there any day that dawns brighter? Any sun more radiant, blinding and fine? All men have their faults, Lord knows, and I marvel sometimes how it is that we go on loving them, and my knight had his. He was brash, and a verbal bully; his sword was edged with sarcasm, and he liked to sneer. He was smart, but I was smarter. His intelligence was different from mine, native and quick and

therefore interesting to me. I liked to observe it, but I never mistook it for high intelligence. Certain simple thoughts and ideas, such as how to change the world, were beyond him. Fortunately, I had blinders on when we met, and his faults were hazy and even invisible to me. The sun, as it were, was in my eyes.

Why fortunately? Because had I seen clearly, I might never have said yes to him. I might never have fallen in love.

I set three conditions on following him, simple ones that he could not help but agree to. First, he must not take me to a certain city on the coast, a sprawling, factionated city of intellectual hysteria and petty sectarian politics, a city of political strife, where I could not possibly live. Second, he must not take me to a certain city north of the first, equally unlivable. Third and last was a third city; he must not take me there. Those were my conditions: three cities out of a thousand, out of ten thousand. When he chose the third city, my three conditions shrunk in a puff of smoke to two.

It was not a bad city. It had its beauty and its charm. Its politics were as crass and doctrinaire as I feared, which in retrospect might have been the best thing that could have happened to me, because I turned my back on the political life sooner rather than later, before my hopes and dreams for a better world were completely gone. I took a job caring for children (in whom hope always abides), then gave that up when I had a child of my own. When Melissa turned five, I started working again, this time for a children's museum. The work suited me in every way, and before long I became program director. I spearheaded a slate of new programs, but the one closest to my heart was the one for injured wild animals. Since it was a city museum, most of these animals were birds.

We had a hawk that was missing an eye and a raven with a broken wing. We had a duck with a mangled foot and an owl that had lost its feathers. We rescued them and we cared for them. It was the beginning of my interest and love for birds.

It was not, however, the beginning of my acquaintance with them. My husband was a professional biologist, an amateur illustrator, and an avid birder, and early in our marriage I accompanied him on his walks. It was always nice to be out, though I would have liked it more if from time to time he had turned his eye from his birds to me. He, I am certain, would have liked it more to be with other birders. He never said as much, but you could tell. It was a difference of orientation, you might say. His outward gaze, I sometimes thought of it, stacked against my gaze at him. With time this difference grew. Our walks became less frequent. We seemed to be drifting apart. Then I got the job at the museum, and life changed overnight. Suddenly, I had a reason to watch birds, too.

Now I could be out with him and do what he was doing. I wanted this very much. We shared an interest, or at least we had. For reasons I never understood, his interest in birds began to dwindle soon after I got my job. The day I bought my first pair of binoculars, I discovered that he had put his away. His passion had shifted from birds to mushrooms. They were now his darlings. He showed me a drawing of one, *Amanita Phalloides*, known as the Death Cap. He had a good hand. It was, no doubt, the perfect likeness, I said.

I was left to learn about birds on my own, and I discovered that, for all its concrete and steel, our city was a rich habitat for them. There were parks and lakes and backyards, as well as the harbor and beyond it, the ocean. In our own little garden we had hummingbirds, chickadees, catbirds, finches, and thrushes. I began to keep a diary of the birds I saw, when and where and how many. I bought a book, *Bird Walks in New England*. I joined the Audubon Society and went on outings with them. When the local chapter needed help, I volunteered. Before long I became secretary of the chapter, then its president.

It was a whole new world for me. When I think of myself back then, I think of a

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hatchling. At forty, I was more than twice as old as my teenage daughter, but emotionally I felt half woman, half child. My marriage was not going well. There was pressure, it seemed, from every direction. I pushed back with pressure of my own, trying to preserve and nurture what we had. But what we had was changing, my husband and I. We did what we could to adapt.

The city was also changing, growing denser and more congested. There was less open space and more concrete. More and taller buildings. The birds were under pressure too, but somehow they seemed quicker to adapt than we did. Falcons took to highrises as though they were trees, feasted on pigeons, and flourished. Crows and ravens changed their diet from carrion to household garbage. Mourning doves began to nest in the eaves of houses, and their population soared.

At home our population declined, as our daughter left for college. I had four years of an empty nest, and then for a while she moved back.

There are some pleasures for a woman that only other women seem able to supply. One of these is a certain kind of conversation: chatty, nuanced, sharply observed. Sympathetic without being overly sympathetic. Rational. Exhaustive. Every woman knows this, and at some point in her life seems determined to forget it. I was at that point in mine, trying to get my husband to talk to me, banging my head in vain against the wall of his retreat. (Aspirin, I'm sorry to report, does nothing for the headache.) It was a decidedly masculine wall, stony, ancient, and obtuse.

With my daughter's return, I stopped banging in favor of singing. She and I talked endlessly, long and richly satisfying melodies of conversation. And I rediscovered a buried truth: one person is a force, but two are a stronger force. And two together are exponentially stronger than two apart. Melissa took me under her wing just as I had done for her as a child. She showed me things that I had never seen, or had forgotten. The shell, for example, that I had created for myself. A shell as pretty as a robin's egg, as thick as an ostrich's, pleasing to the eye and useful at times but as confining as any shell is. With her encouragement I began to peck at this shell. Peck peck peck, until it cracked, and soft, feathery, innocent me emerged. Fresh as a newborn chick. Ready for a new day, a new dawn.

Imagine my surprise when my knight didn't like what he saw. Imagine the pain in my heart. Poor me. Poor him, for not liking.

But there I was, a hatchling. I couldn't very well climb back into my shell. Nor could I fail to see the disapproval in his eyes, nor keep his dark-haired beauty and shining armor from becoming tarnished in my eyes.

I never fell out of love with him. He was my true love, and true love never dies. I didn't want another knight in his place. An eagle mates for life, and I believe that I was born an eagle. But I was taught and raised to be a rail. A yellow rail, a shy, retiring and secretive bird of reeds and deep grasses. When I came out of my shell, I was reborn an eagle, and an eagle is faithful to her companion. An eagle loves her mate, but she lives to spread her wings and fly. I hatched, I looked around, I filled my lungs with air, then I fledged.

For a year we lived in separate houses. It was painful but necessary. Leaving my husband was like losing a limb, and I would wake at night, reaching for something that wasn't there, grasping at a phantom. I took a leave of absence from work and used the time to think. I saw friends, took walks, grew feathers. My husband used his time to further his career. He wrote papers, gave speeches, and sponsored wildlife legislation. He no longer had time for walks of any kind, and the only birds he saw were from an office or an airplane window. I, on the other hand, saw birds galore. On outings with the Audubon Society, on jaunts up and down the coast, on cruises to the North Atlantic. I saw the black-browed albatross, the northern fulmar, and the parasitic jaeger, and it was I who first observed the walking bird.

I was alone when I saw it. It was early morning. Ironically, not somewhere faraway or exotic, but at Swan's Neck Park, a little spit of land that juts into the Atlantic not three miles from my house, named for its long and curving shape. For years it had been a dumping ground for anything and everything, but recently it had been cleaned up and restored. Restored to what? A stinky, soggy marsh of slimy rocks, tidal mudflats and reeds, bullrushes and grasses. Not a human shangri-la by any means. No paradise for man. But the birds adored it.

The sun had just risen, and it was in my eyes as I walked the scrubby path to the end of the park, where I paused, as I do, to watch the waves and the water. There was a light breeze, and after a while I turned and headed back. With the sun behind me everything was as clear as if it had been rinsed that very morning. I saw a spotted sandpiper, a ruddy turnstone, and a flock of dunlins scampering along the rocks. When I reached the marsh, there was a willet, two short-billed dowitchers, and a killdeer. Some chipping sparrows with their rusty caps scrabbled in the dirt. Beyond them on the path was a crow, and beyond the crow was a bird I'd never seen. I'm no world expert when it comes to birds, far from it, but I'm no rank amateur either. Many of the species I know like the back of my hand, and my friends in the Audubon Society say I've got the eyes of a hawk. And I'm telling you, this bird was different. This bird, I swear, was not a bird at all.

And yet it clearly was, or part of it was. It had a beak and feathers and wings. It had a bird's head and a bird's body. It looked like a rock dove, your run-of-the-mill pigeon, all except its legs. They were unlike any bird legs I'd ever seen. Way too long for a bird that size, long and weirdly jointed. The knees, which in a bird are usually tucked into the body and out of sight, were where my knees are, halfway down the leg and plainly visible. So that the legs bent forward, not back, which is the opposite of how birds' legs do. Below the knees were ankles and then feet, which were also strange. They were broad, high-arched and fleshy, with shiny purple skin, tufts of bristly hair (and what bird has hair?), and four fat, splayed-out toes. Not talons, not claws, not webs, not lobes, but toes, two in front and two in back, like exclamation marks. This was something else I'd never seen.

The bird stood there in the dust with one knee cocked, then it shifted its weight and cocked the other. It lifted a foot and took a few short steps, very casual, as if it had nothing better to do and nowhere better to be in the world. And who knows, maybe it didn't. Maybe its purpose, if it had one, was merely to attract attention. To be noticed, to be seen. If this were true, and no offense intended, it was probably a male.

I wondered where this bird had come from. How had it come to be? Was it the product of some bizarre experiment? A mutation born of pollution and filth? An adaptation? An evolutionary leap? A joke?

I wanted a closer look, but when I moved, it got scared. In this it was no different from other birds. It ducked its head and went into a crouch, back toes up, front toes flexed, like a sprinter at the blocks. All at once it shot off down the path, legs churning. Ostriches run, and emus run, and penguins try to run, but no bird runs like that one did. I wouldn't even call it a run. It was more an ultra-fast, Charlie Chaplinesque walk. After ten yards or so it stopped, then turned and eyed me. When I reached for my binoculars, it went into its crouch again, only this time it sprang into the air, spread its wings and took off. Its flight was labored at first, as though it were a bigger and heavier bird. Its unbirdlike feet dragged it down, until it caught some air, and then it sailed away, its long legs trailing behind it like ribbons.

In birding there's no such thing as a secret. An unusual sighting is not something you keep to yourself. You text a friend. You make a post. You call the birding hotline. I did all these things, and by day's end the word was out.

People flocked to see the walking bird. Birders first and foremost, but close on

their heels biologists, and close on theirs, reporters and curiosity-seekers, some of whom naturally brought ice chests, barbecues, folding chairs, and radios. I was interviewed no less than seven times. The story made the front page of the newspaper, not to mention hundreds of twitters, tweets, and blogs. The walking bird was sighted once atop a piling at the end of a broken-down pier just north of Swan's Neck, and one other time, when a man claimed that he saw it with a fish under its wing, striding across the water. Both sightings were unconfirmed, but both made it into the news, the second one accompanied by an artist's rendering of the bird that resembled a commuter with a briefcase tucked under his arm, hurrying for his train. It was not the only drawing of the bird. There were serious attempts as well as caricatures, and what all had in common was that none captured what I had seen. Most weren't even close. A week passed, and there were no more sightings. Two weeks, and the furor and excitement died down.

People started calling it a false alarm and deserted the park in the inverse order of how they had overrun it, the casually curious followed by the professionally curious followed by the fanatics. The nail in the coffin was an article in the local paper, the final one as it turned out, citing me by name and suggesting the whole thing was either a joke, a hoax, or a mistake. It quoted an ornithologist saying I needed glasses. The quote, needless to say, was echoed a hundred-fold on-line.

And maybe I did need glasses, but that didn't change what I saw. I was furious at the implication I couldn't be trusted. I'd worked hard to be honest, both with myself and with others. I didn't make things up. I didn't walk through life with blinders on. At one time yes, but those days were gone.

I waited for the crowds to leave before returning to the park. I was on my guard, and I did get some looks from hangers-on, who apparently recognized my face, and I did my best to ignore them. In addition to my binoculars and spotting scope, I brought a camera this time. An eagle is nothing without her eyes, and I trusted mine. I had seen the bird, and I would see it again, and this time I'd prove it.

But I didn't see it, not at Swan's Neck or any of the other dozens of places I visited. That day or any other day, or any time of day: not at daybreak, not at noon, not at nightfall. My Audubon friends were understanding. No one believed me, but everyone was very nice. They didn't laugh at me. If they whispered behind my back, they did it discreetly. I got scolded by one of them for making birders look ridiculous, which for some, I know, is tautological. Mostly, I had to sit through story after story of mistaken sightings. The eye sees what the mind wants to see and all that.

It was during that time I discovered another thing about being an eagle. She doesn't like being doubted or dismissed. She's a proud bird, and unlike the little rail, who takes pride in her ability to hide, an eagle's pride resides in being peerless and admired. She flies high not simply to hunt but so that people can see how fine she is. How fleet of wing, keen of sight, and clear of mind.

I continued as president of the Audubon chapter, despite sentiment that I should step down. When the time came for re-election, I ran again, against the advice of my friends. I was defeated and offered a lesser position, which I declined. I took a final trip with the group to the Arctic, where we saw the snowy owl and the rock ptarmigan, and once home, I participated in the fall migratory count. With winter there was less birding activity, and when spring arrived, and the first thrush appeared outside my window, announcing itself in sweet song, I found that I had lost my interest in birds.

This was painful. (Though not, I must say, as painful as losing a husband. Not as sharply painful, at any rate. It was a duller pain, a self-inflicted pain, which in its way is worse, doing something to yourself you don't mean to but can't stop.) I wanted to enjoy birds. I certainly knew they could be enjoyed, but sadly, no longer by the likes of me. I still took walks. And I had started to work again at the museum. Our

injured animal exhibit was as popular as ever, though less popular with me. Wounded creatures, you could say, were of less interest. I was more interested in our new dinosaur exhibit with its lessons about survival, extinction, and the ability to adapt.

Outside of work I spent most of my time alone. My daughter had followed in my footsteps by leaving her family of birth to be with her boyfriend, who lived in Tallahassee. I visited her that autumn, and some months later she reciprocated by visiting me. I was sad, as always, when her visit came to an end. I was lonely. In truth, I ached for companionship. As the weeks and months wore on, it became harder and harder to keep self-pity at bay.

There was one antidote I had for these low, depressive feelings, and that was walks. Moving my arms and legs helped stir my blood and raise, if only a little, my spirits. I hadn't been in Swan's Neck Park in over a year, not since the debacle, and one day, for no good reason, I took myself there. It was deserted, save for one other person way off near the point. His tripod and spotting scope marked him unmistakably a birder.

As I started walking out, he folded his tripod, slung it over his shoulder and started walking in. When he was about twenty yards away from me, he stopped. Our eyes met, and I felt the shock of recognition. I could see his chest rise and fall, just as he, I am sure, could see mine. Other than that, each of us was as still as a bird. Then he came closer.

He wore his hair longer than he had, and he had grown a short beard, which highlighted his lips and softened his face. He seemed happy, and he said hello, and for a minute we made awkward conversation. Then we fell silent and looked away from each other, at a loss for words. Then he raised his eyes and said it was good to see me. He was wondering when he would.

I didn't know quite how to take this, and he explained that he'd been coming to Swan's Neck every day, sometimes early, sometimes late, for close to a year. I replied, slightly baffled, that I hadn't. Yes, he said, he knew. And I said, yes, I guess you do. I guess it's obvious.

He asked if he could show me something, and without waiting, he unzipped his knapsack. Inside was a fancy birding camera with a telephoto lens, which is how we birders document our sightings. Anything less is mere hearsay. The days of Audubon, who shot his birds in order to draw them, are long past.

It was strange to see the camera in his pack, not because he didn't demand proof of things—he was a scientist, after all—but because he'd given up birding years before. Under the camera was a notebook, which was what he was after. He pulled it out and flipped through the pages until he found the one he wanted. Then he handed the book to me, and the breath caught in my throat.

It was a colored drawing of the walking bird, exactly as I remembered it, pigeon body, long strange legs, as if he'd seen it with his own eyes, or with mine. My heart skipped a beat. I heard hoof beats. I swear to God, hoof beats. As though the knight's steed was on its way.

"You've seen it," I cried.

He shook his head.

"You have. That's how it looks. Exactly."

"It's how you described it in the paper."

I had described it, but not like that. Not in such detail. Everything perfect, from the coloring, to the proportions, to the way it held its body, to its feet and legs. The bird seemed ready to walk right off the page.

He asked if he had it right.

Dumbfounded, I nodded.

"You're sure?"

July 2012

"It looks alive," I said.

He had a theory about the legs, which had to do with adaptation to the paving of the planet. Humans aren't the only ones, he said, who can and must adapt.

He was speaking for the wild things he loved but also, I sensed, for himself. He slipped the notebook from my hands, gave the drawing one last appraising look, then closed it and returned it to his pack. It was then I realized another thing that was strange about the camera: my husband had never owned a camera in his life. He was not a picture-taker. For as long as I had known him, he had never shot a single frame. Yet here he was, drawn by word alone—my word—ready to capture my bird with the camera's lens.

I was moved, almost to tears. He shouldered his knapsack, then paused, as though waiting for me to say something. Thank you, I think, would have sufficed. But before I could utter a word, there was a stirring in the grass, and a meadowlark appeared. It's a common bird, with a black and yellow chest, but something about it seemed special. My knight, I think, agreed. He and I, we were in agreement on this: that at that hour, in that light, on that morning, this common bird was the most beautiful thing in the world. ○

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Terraformations

if we are unfolded like schematics
chalked like so many theorems
and hung like so many portraits
down a corridor of millennia

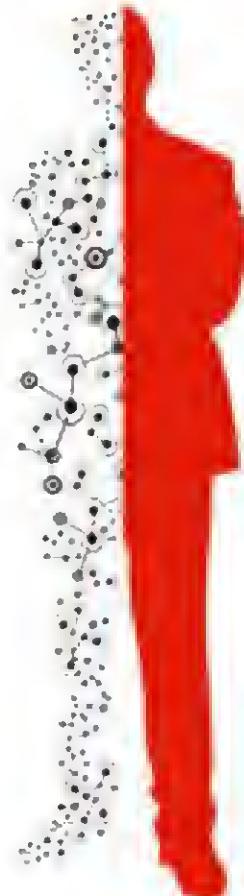
if we abandon the core of millennia
when the narrow view held sway
that this is our one and singular iteration
the true imago of our human kin

then true human kind is no more fixed
than the soup of genetics inside a chrysalis
than a nectar for metamorphosis
and our attempts to alter distant planetary bodies
to make the unlivable conform to our shape
is no more than the inverse

is no more than the universe
diddling its strings of codes
to terraform us
branch by branch
to its unfathomable
and unfolding schema

—Robert Frazier

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LONG NIGHT ON REDROCK

Felicity Shoulders

Felicity Shoulders spent three years as a geology major before deciding to be a writer, so she has an enduring affection for rocks, red and otherwise. This is her fifth piece in *Asimov's*. The author's first published fantasy appeared in *F&SF* earlier this year.

“If you’re exploring the town, you should stop walking,” Peder Finn called down from his porch. The stranger, a fair-haired man bent under a backpack, paused at the gate. Peder pegged him for an offworlder. A dozen telltales said as much: from his low-topped shoes, likely to let in sand, to his unshaded eyes, without tanned-in squint or sunglass marks. It was almost aynid harvest, a suspicious time for an offworlder to come visiting.

The man took in the dusty yard, where Peder’s children had lined and stacked rocks into an imaginary city and set a carved toy horse on an overturned bucket to reign. Finally his gaze settled on Peder, who had paused in carving another toy, a long strip of synthwood still hanging from his knife.

Peder produced a noncommittal smile. “Nothing that way you want to visit.”

“Oh!” the stranger said. “Right. Lost track. Good afternoon, Mr. . . .”

“Finn.”

“My name’s Ando Lucas, Mr. Finn,” the younger man said, mirroring Finn’s smile with a greater attempt at warmth. “I’m in the area collecting folk songs.” Peder couldn’t place the bland, smoothed-out accent.

“Folk songs.”

“Why yes. Isolated worlds, especially with a homogeneous—I mean coherent—cultural base, often keep producing music that—am I boring you?”

“I don’t sing.”

Ando set down his backpack and detached a retractable microphone from his jacket cuff. “Do you know any stories or local legends then? Living so close to the Desert of Nightmares and all.” He waved a pale hand in the direction he’d originally been walking.

“We don’t call it exactly that,” said Finn, burlesquing his accent slightly. “Round here we call it 103. Do you want to hear what I learned of that great wasteland, growing up here?” He looked off toward the ruddy horizon and squinted impressively.

“Oh yes,” the young man said, and stepped through the open gate.

“Well now . . .” Finn dropped the exaggerated accent and leaned forward. “When this system was first surveyed in 2208, Captain St. Clair of the *Intrepid* detected a gravimetric anomaly under Sector 103, a large area of unexpected high density material. Thinking it would prove to be a valuable mineral deposit, the mucky-mucks sent a team of geologists to visit the surface, where they managed to determine the

mass was a set of regular something-hedrons thirty-odd klicks below the sand. That was before they discovered the area also had a discomfiting tendency to produce visions and simulacra and other beasties. Monsters from the Id!" Finn grinned at Ando's crestfallen face. "Or didn't you think anyone on Redrock had Galactipedia access? Some of us have even been offworld."

Ando shook off his disappointment and took another look at Peder, apparently reassessing. Peder knew he made a convincing hayseed—tall, almost as lanky at thirty-seven as he'd been at seventeen, the muscles coiled tight on the long bones, and wearing a full beard even more coppery than his hair. Odd the stranger hadn't remarked on his hair yet—but maybe he'd come across enough of the redhead Re-drockers to learn they were tired of fielding comments.

Peder heard Lise's step in the front room, near the window. She'd want this nosy space flotsam shooed off sooner rather than later. In the interests of convincing the visitor to leave, Peder aided his scrutiny by lifting his left sleeve a few centimeters with the tip of his knife to expose the Corps tattoo.

"You were a marine?" Ando seemed surprised. "And you came back here?" His eyes darted over the raised beds ranged beyond the house and he added, "To grow aynids?"

"Why the hell not? My wife, too. It's a beautiful place, and the work's pleasant enough."

"But . . . you've been—"

"Enough places to know I like it here." Peder tipped his blade toward the rusty mountains edging the vast expanse of plain, the delicate blue bowl of the sky.

"But won't the bottom fall out of the aynid business any day, with the recession and the synthetics?"

"You must make a lot of friends on your travels. Look, kid, they've been saying that for years about synthetics, but it just isn't the same. Call it snobbery, call it 'authentic terroir'—but our aynids are better. More tastes, more complexity, more everything. Every kid gets an aynid on his birthday here, instead of a cake, and I can tell you firsthand: the vat-grown substitutes Lise and I got each other during our tours were shoddy imitations. As for recession, when are we not in one? The rich stay rich enough to buy luxuries."

Ando nodded vigorously at that. Peder heard the side door swing shut, and Lise strode into view, heading for a pile of paving stones they kept by the shed. She looked through the stranger, turned her back, and started carrying large piles of stones to drop heavily by the side of the house. This exercise displayed her muscles in a way Peder found rather pleasant, but which he knew was meant to intimidate the intruder. Certainly they didn't need the paving stones moved—they'd had them for years and never gotten around to using them yet.

Ando stood on the middle porch step, looking at the back of Lise's head as her smooth dark hair swung. He looked downcast, so Peder figured Lise's psychic message about dropping a pile of rocks on his head if he came near their aynid beds was coming through.

"Perhaps you'd better be going," Peder said, picking up his whittling and waving the knife he had never put down.

Behind him, the inner door clicked open and Nessa, their nine-year-old, said with great emphasis, "You left your horse *outside*, Jamie!" Peder sighed at this transparent ploy to get a look at the offworlder. Jamie wasn't the sort of child who misplaced things. Now he crowded behind his sister, peeking at the strange man on the front steps.

"Uh, you're right, Mr. Finn. I'll be going." He smiled broadly at the redhead children and made an awkward nod at Lise's back. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Finn!" he said in a loud, unnatural tone as he backed toward the gate.

Lise dropped another load of stones and mounted the porch. "Mrs. Finn?"

"Despite my best efforts, he seems to think we're backward refugees from the nineteenth century, Corporal Hendry ma'am." He dodged Lise's playful swipe at his hair.

Nessa and Jamie clattered out the front door and hung on the fence, watching the retreating figure.

"Think he'll be back?" Peder asked.

"He'd have to be pretty stupid," Lise replied. "But then again . . ."

"He claimed he was here to sample our indigenous musics."

"Yeah. We guard the aynids tonight."

Stranger dispensed with, Nessa rushed the porch and clambered onto her mother's shoulders. She urged her steed to charge at her brother. Peder was honor-bound to offer his own services to Jamie, who spurred him around the yard shrieking, "I'm taller than you, Nessa! I'm taller now!" The potential thief was forgotten until it was time to tuck in plants and children that evening.

"Bedtime. No more elephants."

Nessa kept her eyes on the screen. "It's lions. Jamie's afraid of them, so I can't play it when he's in here. And I have to play, it's for school!"

"Yeah, sure. I remember that 'play with lion sims for two hours' assignment from when I was nine." He scooped up his daughter and threw her over his shoulder.

"I'm almost ten!"

"If you were ten, you'd have your own room," he said, pausing at the door to the kids' room. "I *thought* we hadn't cleared out all the creepers and old junk from the storeroom yet, but maybe I've forgotten . . ." He started toward the storeroom door with Nessa shrieking in horrified delight. "Looks like we haven't got a bed in here either, but I'm sure a big girl like you can sleep on a pile of siding?"

"No! No! I'm nine, take me to the real room!"

"Right."

Jamie was already in bed on his side of the room, lost under the covers playing some sort of tunneling game. Peder made the traditional show of trying to find him while Nessa got ready. At last Lise chivvied Nessa in from the bathroom and both kids lay still and warm to receive their parental kisses and hugs. Their mother smelled of the musty dew-drop irrigation system and the faint, rich spice of the aynids that had brushed their precious oil onto her ministering fingers. The heady scent of bulbs almost ready to harvest—the smell of money on Redrock.

"Will you read me a story?" Jamie asked.

Lise brushed his soft forehead with one earthy finger. "I have more work to do still, little gem. Ask your father."

So Peder read, and afterwards, still staring out the window as she did to show her aloofness from childish stories, Nessa said, "If that man comes back, will Mam shoot him?"

"Only if she has to."

"She shot that boy last year."

Peder patted Jamie's curls and went to sit at the foot of Nessa's bed. "Two years ago, and he was an adult under the law. Wasn't even a serious wound—I'm sure he's back to skulking around the spaceport and trying to steal the bread out of farmers' mouths already."

"But this man isn't from around here. Will Mam kill him?"

"You don't kill people just because their folks live too far away to complain."

"Why do you? Kill people?"

Peder looked down at his hands, knuckles casting long shadows in the glow of the nightlight. He rubbed at the itchy adhesive-filled line of a long gash on his palm.

"Because you have to. That's the only good reason. Your mother's a good shot, and she didn't catch that boy—that *man* in the leg by accident. All she needed to do was stop him and get our bulbs back. He wasn't trying to hurt our family, only steal."

"But you killed people—or aliens or something—in the Marines."

"That was my family then. Come on, now. No one's getting hurt. If that fool comes back, I'll get him with a rugby tackle."

"But—"

"We can talk about this some other time, Nessie." Peder leaned in for a kiss and whispered, "Don't frighten your brother. Go to sleep."

Peder walked downstairs, ears full of the creak and tick of the house, listening for the outraged yell or illicit whispers that were not there tonight. Outside, the light and warmth were falling away. He paused to pull jackets off the hooks by the side door, one for himself and one for Lise, who would have forgotten, as she so often did, to allow herself the small comforts.

She was indeed sleeveless, the slight glow of sun-traps showing goose bumps on the curves of her arms. She bent over the raised beds, checking the last row of dew-drop monitors that gave the dry-loving aynids the mere traces of moisture they needed every night. The plants were tall now, spidery and ungainly, the pale gold lobes of their bulbs hidden away below ground. Lise stood up to draw the evap-proof veil across the plants and Peder saw the metal sheen of her sidarm.

"All tucked in, no signs of disturbance," he reported.

She looked up, smiled, and shrugged into the coat he offered. She gave him one of her jerky half-hugs, a quick sideways squeeze that almost hurt. "Help me with the covers."

They brought out the heavy wooden covers, only used at this vulnerable time of year, and locked them down. A ritual delaying action against aynid-thieves.

"Watch all night?" Peder asked.

"We'll sleep while the kids are at school. No one's stupid enough to try in daylight." Peder watched her placing two chairs, the coiledness of her like a startled animal. She caught his gaze and tried to smile, only her unmoved eyes clearly visible in the exhausted light. "Offworlders," she said with a shrug.

"I suppose it's a bad time for me to ask if you've considered my idea of taking the kids offworld before next planting."

Lise laughed, a generous unguarded sound. "Probably."

"They have to see some green sometime. Good for their vision. Besides, Jamie asked me today if there really was such a thing as elephants."

The solar lights had faded entirely now, but Lise's callused hand found its way unerringly into his. He dipped his head to kiss her cap of hair, a color people better acquainted with horses than he was had called "chestnut." He bent far enough to kiss her lips, then straightened. "I'll make coffee," he offered and left her standing in the yard, eyes scanning for some surreptitious light.

It was Lise's turn to doze in a chair, and Peder took tours of the aynid beds, first clockwise, then counterclockwise. The wind was whuffling lazily from the direction of town, and occasionally animals would pass, tiny indigenous monsters carrying on their own economy of life and death alongside the imported, alien systems of humans and aynids.

Behind him, Lise started in her sleep and mumbled something. "Finn . . ." No screaming tonight, for all she was so keyed up. "Peder," she said, clearer now: she was awake. "Did you hear something?"

"Nothing untoward."

"I thought—a few minutes ago while I was asleep. Off toward Frasers'." She turned on her torch and waved toward that house.

"Lise, are you going to trust your ears while your brain is off?"

"I heard something." She stood up. "Maybe we scared him off so he hit the Fraser twins."

"Or maybe you're just anxious."

Lise scowled, the light from the torch casting harsh shadows along her cheekbones and nose. "I heard something." She pulled her hat down over her ears. "I'm walking to the Frasers' place."

Peder watched her light bob away, and turned his off and on for no reason. "Nothing," he muttered, and went into the house, leaving traces of sand and ruddy dust on the sealed plinth of the kitchen floor and along the stairs. He waited in the hallway outside the kids' room, the instinctive pause to half-hear the rhythm of their sleeping breath. Peder stood for thirty seconds, maybe forty, a tired man waiting for a forgotten cue, before he realized he had been listening so hard he had almost heard the breaths that weren't there.

He stumbled in the door, threw on the lights. Beds empty and rumpled. "Nessa!" he called. "Jamie!" He heard the fear in his voice before he registered it completely. Nessa might sneak out for some purpose of her own, but Jamie? Peder listened to the house for only a moment before pounding down the stairs and back into the night. He called again, waited for a sound or a responding call, then stared down at the dusty porch.

Footprints, smaller than his and longer than Lise's, the tread strange. Going in and coming out—the outward tracks with shorter, scuffing tracks. He ratcheted in a breath, leaned against the doorjamb, lost another few seconds. Stupid.

"Lise!" he bellowed. "Lise!" Some part of him, a part tucked aside in case he could ever joke again, thought he was ridiculous, bellowing like some sort of echolocating behemoth across an alien plain. "Lise!"

There was a noise, a brightness filling the house's broad lee windows. A truck. Somehow, this would put everything right. The kids would be aboard. The footprints were his imagination. The kids who had strayed on some unlikely errand would be returned by one of the neighbors who owned a vehicle.

He burst out onto the porch to see Lise jumping down from the Frasers' half-track, alone.

"Hovercar track," she said. "I crossed it near the Frasers' so I borrowed their truck to follow it back . . . it leads here. But our aynids are fine, what could—"

Peder had to override some deep-grained principle in order to interrupt her, but he had to bring her fully into his nightmare. "The kids are gone."

Lise's face went blank. "The kids?"

"Why would someone take the kids?" Peder asked, as if she was the one who'd brought it up, not him.

"Not for anything good." She started toward the house. "No use waking up the sheriff, we're the closest deputies. Gear."

Peder clawed emergency water and food packs out of the closet upstairs; then a low, squat shelter that would withstand a few more notches of sandstorm than most, some thin blankets. He could just see Lise, half-hidden by the doorway, performing the swift, efficient series of movements he had imagined her rehearsing, in their first years home, every time a tile fell or a lost critter hit the window, every time her body tensed in the shelter of his long arms: two steps to the wall, one long swipe to uncover the safe, press-two-three-thumb, 2-4-7 code, the door wide, the rifle out. One for him too.

He wanted to tell her this was overkill, that finding the bastard was the thing; they weren't storming a fortress or taking down a phalanx of drones, just a rat who didn't have a hole to hide in. But, Peder realized, standing above a pile of survival

gear that now included a stove and a backup transmitter as tall as Nessa, he had no high ground himself.

"Armor?" he couldn't help but ask, seeing the black-and-white civilian brand body-huggers on the bed next to their Corps-reservist rifles.

"For storms," she said, and he subsided. Redrock sand was round-grained and soft, but in a wind it would still take your skin off. He replaced his work shirt, pulling the taut, strangely sporty-looking top over his head, feeling already shorter, denser, balled up inside. And he hadn't even touched the gun.

They were back in the truck in under fifteen, rebreathers dangling like epaulets from the ridiculous armor. Peder carried the necessities—no stove, no extra transmitter, three knives—in the folded shelter, forcing Lise to shoulder both weapons herself.

"I'll navigate," she said, and Peder took the wheel, turned the truck's power on, tried not to look at the happy holo-image of the Frasers with their spouses and kids that popped up next to the speed gauge.

The track of a hovercar was as faint as its sound, both uncommon here and for good reason. But Peder could track it, if the wind didn't kick up, if the rat didn't cut across any desert pavement or bare rock between here and Spaceport. *If, if, if.*

Nessa knew there was something wrong without opening her eyes. She was cold, and at the wrong angle, and there was a noise, too regular to be wind or sand on the paneled roof. She was used to waking up upside-down or half-out of bed—Dad said she swam laps in her sleep to make up for living on a dry planet—but this was different. She was moving. A belt twisted uncomfortably around her midsection—had she fallen asleep in her clothes? She fluttered her eyes and saw lights and dials, two seat-backs and a console. Beyond, a horizon of darkness and dust glowing in headlights.

She shut her eyes again. A car, but riding so smooth it could only be a hovercar. She'd never been in a hovercar! But that was because no one they knew had one . . . she fluttered her eyes again, trying to see the driver. She was lying across the seat with her head behind his chair so she couldn't, but she could hear him muttering in that offworlder accent, sort of squinched-sounding. The stranger, Ando.

Nessa felt fear open up like a maw where her lungs should be. The simple safety lessons she had gotten from Mam had focused on being grabbed during the day on foot, not waking up in a hovercar. There were several good places to stomp, twist, and jab, but they were all on the other side of the seat-back. She held her breath to keep from crying and noticed that Jamie was in the passenger seat, sleeping soundly under a safety harness. On top of all her fear, now she was responsible for taking care of Jamie too, in whatever strange fairy-tale prison they might be heading for.

She slowly raised her hand and moved it to the seatbelt sawing across her ribs, traced along it until she found the release—of course, the thing digging into her back. It was at an awkward angle, but she kept wiggling and it gave—with a loud click.

Suddenly Ando's face loomed between the seat-backs and Nessa gasped, then tried to close her eyes anyway.

"*I thought I maybe gave you too little,*" he said. "Not usually my job." His voice was lower and less pleasant than it had been on their front porch.

Nessa opened her eyes. Ando had turned back to the shifting sand and confusion outside. "Where are we going? Where're my mam and dad?" As she said it, the hole where her heart and lungs had been expanded again—what if they were dead? Could this little man have killed them?

"They can't catch us. Nothing on this rock can now." He smiled a nasty smile. "We're going to take a little trip offworld."

"I don't want to go. I'll tell the captain. Or the pilot, or whatever."

Ando laughed. "It's *our* ship. They know you don't want to go."

Nessa felt another sob coming, but refused to let it out. "Why did you take us?"

He didn't look back at her now. "The boss says redheads are the new thing. Exotic. He sent me here." His voice was drifting upward as he complained, as he maybe forgot to be tough. "Worst job ever. Eddie's sick and this place is the pits."

Nessa tried to understand this. "But . . . you came all the way to Redrock just because we have red hair? Don't offworlders have red hair sometimes?"

"There are some people that do, but fewer than here, and less . . . redheady. Like—pale, freckles. They want all that stuff."

Nessa was getting angry now, letting anger push out fear like Mam had told her you could do. The illogic, the shallow stupidity of what little she understood, inflated her with frustration and rage.

"I thought offworld everyone was *genetic*," she said, as if Ando were a poor specimen of this impressive trait. "Why don't you get genetic redheads?"

Ando laughed again, a nervous laugh, but he answered in his tough voice. "Call it 'authentic terroir.'"

The track was straight—he must be driving an autonav course, and only deviating when there was a rock pinnacle or hollow too big to float over. Following a straight line, however faint, left plenty of Peder's mind free, and Lise barely glanced at the map in her lap.

"No, he's not headed for you," Lise was saying over the radio to Port Newton. "He must have transport parked in the desert; he won't keep them on Redrock."

"Well, if we can't embargo his—"

"You can send a patrol north by northwest and cut him off!"

Peder could hear the "fucks" Lise wasn't saying.

"He's in a hovercar," she said with careful diplomacy. "Even with stops to clean the filters, he could be averaging 130, maybe even more. We need to get out in front of him and you're our best bet."

"I'll send an officer out now." The woman's voice faded to a murmur, then returned. "Update us if he changes course."

They drove on in silence for a while. Peder glanced at his wife. "Lise?" The half-track rolled over a rock he should have dodged, and Lise nearly lost the map. Peder looked where he was driving. "Lise?" he tried again, after a moment. "Hendry?"

"Yeah."

"Any more information for me?"

She shook her head, and they both stared in front of them at the dark shapes of ridge and dike cutting out chunks of stars, at the empty places of the world into which their children had disappeared.

The track barely wavered, even when it passed into the early-warning zone of Sector 103. The map buzzed in Lise's lap and Peder, glancing at it, saw the red-striped zone inching onto the screen like an enemy advance. Lise's hand, silhouetted against the screen, was shaking.

"Is he taking them in there? The line, does it go in, or just skim the warning zone?" He was pretty sure already, but he wanted Lise to say it. "Lise, honey, is he taking our kids into 103?"

The bumper line, built out of old tires on the colony's dime, loomed ahead. The trail headed toward it at an oblique angle.

Lise reached toward him, and Peder expected her to grab his hand, but her fingers closed on the steering wheel and she jerked it toward her. The half-track slewed as it executed a wide right turn. Peder took his foot off the accelerator and let the big machine drag itself to a stop, pointed back the way they'd come.

"What the hell?"

"We have to go back." Lise's hand was still tight on the wheel.

"What do you mean?"

"We'll never catch him. Spaceport's sending a team—"

"Bullshit! Lise, the only way that chicken-hearted bastard goes in there is because he read that no manifestations appear if you pass through at 150 klicks per. He is speeding out of reach, Lise. We can just pull 100-something in this tub. We only catch him when he fouls, or at his ship. We have no time!" He tried to pry her fingers off the wheel.

Lise stared at him, white visible around the brown of her eyes, and took her hand off the wheel. "Go get the kids."

"Finally. You—"

She opened her door and stepped down into the sand. Without thinking, Peder followed, fear and clawing anxiety transmuting to anger. "This is your fucking plan?" he shouted. "Walk home? Punish yourself by dying in the desert alone while I try to get the kids back all by myself?" He looked at her back, the white very bright in the headlights of the truck. "You think I can even pull that off?" A few long strides closed the distance. "Lise, what the fuck are you doing? What are you afraid of seeing in there? No one knows what'll be in there before they go in, right? Or is there only one thing you're afraid of, the one thing you won't tell me?" Her stride didn't slow. "We're a team. How often have I told you, whatever you're hiding, I will listen, I will help? Turn me down, turn the free fucking Corps docs down, but do *not* walk away from Nessa and Jamie over some bullshit that was over years ago!" He grabbed her arm.

The punch landed before he saw her spin, a strong left that knocked the air out of him. They sparred at home, but this was no civil exchange of bruises. It was a sucker punch. She hooked his ankle with her foot and toppled him, but he held on and pulled her down as he fell. She jerked her arm to twist his wrist painfully and rolled away, free, to her knees, getting up. She was going to run. Anger or despair pushed Peder up in a surge, and he tackled his wife. He heard her teeth slam against each other as her face hit the sand, sending up a plume that coated his mouth, too, with the grit and near-sweetness of Redrock dust.

He held her arms and pulled her up to kneeling, peering at her quivering, dirty face for signs of real injury. She was shaking, but didn't look angry or crazy. She was all fear. Her breath was too fast, her eyes wide when they weren't blinking away dirt. She had never been this bad outside of night terrors. He didn't know how to call back his rational, tightly controlled wife into the scared child in front of him.

Falteringly, he kissed her, and tasted blood. "Hendry, I've never met anyone who could love harder than you, and I've never seen you love anything more than those children. If you don't go with me, you're going to regret it forever." He listened to the words. To him they sounded convincing, but her eyes didn't change. "Do you hear me? I cannot save them without you. And if you think whatever secret you're holding now is bad, imagine living with that *and* the knowledge you let your children get sold into some offworld hell because you were too scared to try!"

Lise's eyes focused and her teeth ground sand. She took one long, shaky breath and her arms relaxed in his grip. Her head bowed. "There's no kind of choice, is there? Let's go, Finn."

They helped each other up and back to the truck.

"What you forgot to say is," Lise rasped and spit blood and dust out the door, "if I didn't go with you, you'd haul me hogtied in the back of the half-track."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lise closed her eyes as Peder turned the half-track's lights back toward the boundary line of black dots and her hand found his knee. They bumped over the barrier,

covered a few open yards—no cable fence this far from town—and were in Sector 103.

“Think tame thoughts,” Lise said, and didn’t try to smile.

“It just shows what you know!” Ando spat. “I thought you guys had Galactipedia access? If we go fast enough, the things can’t catch us.”

“What if there’s a sandstorm? Can you go fast in a sandstorm?” Nessa quizzed, enjoying the tension she saw in Ando’s movements, the sheen on his neck. He wasn’t like a real grown-up at all.

“I thought . . . I read the sand here didn’t want to be moved around.”

“There are more storms here than anywhere else,” Nessa said, pretty sure she’d heard this somewhere. “The sand kicks up, just like anywhere. It can scour the clothes off you, and flay your skin right off.” She looked over to make sure Jamie was still asleep. This was the sort of thing she wasn’t supposed to say around Jamie, and Mam wasn’t supposed to say around her. “A sandstorm grates you up like cheese, same in the 103 as anywhere.”

She saw Ando check the car’s map display for storms on the radar. Just wisps, and that horrible countdown: *139 minutes to destination*.

“The only difference is,” she said in her sing-songy, scariest voice, “in 103 when the storm is done, the sand lies flat, like it never happened. Flat sand, and your body, dead as anything.”

Jamie sighed in his sleep, and Nessa snaked an arm between the seat-backs to touch his shoulder. “I think he’s waking up.”

Ando said something Nessa didn’t understand—probably a swear in some offworld jargon.

“Can I have him back here with me?”

“No! We’re not stopping. We’re safe from the nightmares if we don’t stop.” He scowled over his shoulder at Nessa. “And we’re safe from sandstorms in here.” He tapped the window with his knuckle. “Even if there was one, we’d just wait it out.”

“But then we wouldn’t be safe from nightmares,” Nessa said, as if she wasn’t scared at all.

“I should just give you another shot,” Ando grumbled. “I might get the dosage wrong the other way, this time. You might not wake up.”

Nessa shrugged. “Do it, if you’re gonna.”

Ando bit his well-gnawed lip and resumed driving, eyes on the green line on the fancy heads-up display. The countdown ticked down, faster than any clock Nessa had ever watched, she thought. *100 minutes*.

It seemed to Nessa, sitting in the middle of the back seat with a hand on each front one, trying to think of some other way to harass the enemy, that the note of the hovercar’s drive had changed. It was louder and whinier. The screen flashed a red symbol in the lower left. “What’s that mean?” Nessa asked, and Ando just switched the heads-up off. Something still blinked red, casting an angry throb onto Ando’s pinched, unhappy face. The minutes ticked back up to 115 on the map in the center console.

Nessa bounced in her seat, well past the point where sleeplessness made her tired. Something was going wrong. Something was going to happen.

The hovercar lurched almost to a stop, then spurted forward once with an almost gleeful whistle and came down hard, nose first. Nessa’s arms came up instinctively as the sand filled the screen and she hurtled into the front seat, toward the console. She heard something plastic breaking and felt something that wasn’t plastic pop, and even after the car crashed down along its length, she thought her whole body was rushing painfully into her head.

She was lying on the buttons and dials, and when she pushed herself away, slivers of plastic and glass bit her palms. The dome light in the hovercar was still on.

"Jamie?" she tried to say, but it came out wrong, garbled by the two teeth and gush of blood that came with it. She turned her head, trying to see her brother, and a long shard of the map interface screen fell from her forehead.

"Chaimee," she managed and more importantly, managed to see him: his eyes were still closed, and he slumped against his seat harness looking awkward, like a thrown doll that had landed funny. But not hurt.

She crawled into the back seat and sat up. Her eyes stung and when she wiped her head, her hand came away bloody. She reached out and wiped a red "NH" onto the stipple-grey of the upholstery.

Ando moaned. "I hurt everywhere," he mumbled, and batted his harness release until it clicked open. Nessa wiped her eyes with her sticky fingers and saw his face, relatively unhurt, peering at her. "You look awful. If you're so smart, why didn't you strap yourself back in?"

Nessa thought of something about valuable cargo, and why hadn't he, but she remembered her mouth wasn't up to much pronouncing. She opened it to display the new gap in her teeth and Ando shuddered.

"There's a first aid kit," he said, and kicked his door ajar when it hesitated to open. He returned in a moment with a kit and backpack. "You've ruined the map," he said, waving at the pieces littering the console. "But we have to leave the car anyway."

Nessa sucked up a bit of blood or drool before attempting: "Leave?"

"We have to get to the ship! We'll walk." His voice was high and whiny, not scary at all.

Nessa winced as the man sprayed something cold on her forehead from a bottle and followed it with a dollop of bandagel. He read the side of the first bottle, following the lines with his finger, and shrugged. He gestured toward Nessa's mouth, which he seemed not to want to look at, and she opened it. The spray tasted like burning plastic smelled, but the cool was soothing on her torn lip and tooth sockets.

"I'm not walking," she said, and was pleased it came out clear. "I won't go to your stupid spaceship just because you say!" Lisp, but understandable.

"Won't you?" Ando pulled a small pistol out of his pocket and twitched the barrel at Nessa. "How about now?"

Nessa shut her newly functional mouth and scooted back in her seat.

"You'll walk."

"What about Jamie?"

"I have a thing, an antidote . . ." He extricated an injector from his backpack and walked around to lean in at the passenger door.

"Wait! He'll be scared," protested Nessa, and pushed her way back between the seats, gingerly sweeping aside blood and glass with her sleeve. "Look over here," she whispered, turning Jamie's warm, soft face toward her.

His eyes opened, and Nessa remembered she herself was an alarming sight. He started to cry, and she sighed.

"You're awake, Jamie. I'm sorry I look a fright. We've been kidnapped by, uh, a goblin-man." She toyed with blaming the goblin-man for her wounds, but she realized in time that this would make matters worse. "The goblin-man's magic hovercar crashed and I lost two teeth, see?" She unfolded her stained fingers and Jamie, who was very interested in the losing of teeth, quieted his sobs.

"One of mine is loose," he said and wiped his nose.

"I don't believe it. You're just a big baby."

"It is! Look!"

Nessa could hear Ando rummaging in the hovercar's storage. She didn't know much

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about deserts—survival camp was next year in school—and less about Sector 103, but she was convinced she knew more than the offworlder did. He must be crazy.

She tipped her teeth into Jamie's palm and ran her hands over the dashboard, looking for a big blocky radio beacon like the ones in their neighbors' trucks, but everything was dark, and had been strange and sleek to begin with. Out the hovercar doors, blackness. She thought she saw something move in it, and looked away.

"Nessa," Jamie said, "I want to go home."

She turned from her search of the hovercar and studied her brother. Usually she teased him for being so scaredy, but now she just felt sorry for him. Tears stuck his left eyelashes together.

"Don't tell the goblin-king," she said, casually promoting Ando, "but Mam and Dad are coming. They've got magic swords, and horses."

"Like knights?"

"Yes, just like that. Like in your picture books," said Nessa, who preferred the kind of story with ghosts and haunted spaceships.

"They're coming!" Jamie exulted.

"Don't tell goblin Ando," she repeated as the man reappeared and waved the gun in her field of vision. Nessa urged Jamie out and shook the debris from her skin and pajamas. They were barefoot, both of them. How far could they possibly get? She shivered, from the cold but also from the knowledge that they were in Sector 103. The desert where ghosts and nightmares were real.

"On horses," she hissed to Jamie, drawing comfort from comforting him. She tightened her grip on his hand.

Peder tried to keep his eyes on the thin line of disturbed sand, crisscrossed here and there by the blurs of sand-devils and the tracks of creatures—or the Sector's creations. When he looked to either side, he was more likely to see a face in the dust, or a distinctive figure cut out of the darkness by the edge of his headlight. His father, or a wolf. Once it was a military drone, the kind the Farj had hacked and turned against them.

Lise rode now with her eyes closed.

The headlights hit something ahead that wasn't sand—two small spots that grew to figures, one much shorter than the other. Peder let the weight and grip of the truck pull them to a halt. Jamie and Nessa stood in the highbeams, pajamas bright but skin ashy and covered with purple bruises.

Peder jumped down from the cab and ran toward the children, calling their names. Nessa stumbled in the sand, pulling Jamie down with her, and Peder fell to his knees, scooped up his daughter, and held her as blood dribbled out of her mouth.

"Lise! Lise, get over—" he looked over his shoulder and saw her standing on the truck's running board, full lip caught between her teeth.

"Those aren't the kids," she yelled. "We have to keep going."

Peder looked back at the body across his arm, so light, no longer moving. Her eyes had rolled back. Peder looked at Jamie, reached out to touch his face, and grasped grit as the flesh disappeared in the mounting wind.

He got back into the half-track and drove on, the heavy treads of the vehicle passing over the fading imprints of his knees.

"How did you know?" he asked after another klick.

"Pajamas were clean. No dust."

Peder nodded and drove on. "No point wondering which of our brains those came from."

"How would we tell?" Lise looked out the window for the first time in an hour. The wind was still rising, and with it the sand rose, shielding or suggesting the half-

formed shapes that must be out there. A wall. The jutting wing of a downed craft. Something low-slung and lizardy.

"It starts slow, I hear," Peder offered.

"We've already been inside for an hour. It's had time to get to know us." The armor in Lise's suit masked clenched muscles, but her body language was clear: hunched around her rifle, peering into the nebulous dark.

They were heading into stronger winds, a knot of ugly radar on Lise's forgotten map, and Peder was sure the hovercar's track would vanish soon. He was counting on the straight line, on Ando having too little guile to have taken an indirect course for hours on end.

How long could a hovercar hold up in this sand? If you were running all out, not stopping to clean the filter every bleeding half-hour? As if in answer, a line of reflectors blazed out of the night ahead: the back of a hovercar. The shape was distinct and persistent, and unlike the peripheral phantoms, it wasn't the color of sand. But then, the children hadn't been, either.

He pulled up beside the wreck—it was a wreck all right, its lightweight body crushed at the nose. No one visible. Both of them filed out, rifles ready but fingers off triggers.

"Jamie? Nessa?" Lise's voice was oddly quiet, only audible above the buffets of wind because Peder's brain was already full of the names.

"Blood," Lise said, and snaked into the passenger side. She tested the stickiness of it with a finger, lifted it to her nose. "Smells right."

"Perfuming capabilities are on the long list of shit I don't know about this place," Peder said, aiming his scope light at a blur of footprints leading off.

Lise stood and held up a tiny white-marbled bead. "Baby tooth. The root's worn down, so it's Nessa's."

Peder took her place at the door and studied the extent of the blood. He pointed his light into the back seat and saw the shaky initials. "She's okay."

Lise kicked open the crumpled lid of the storage bin. He heard her intake of breath, then the lid slammed. "Come on, we have a chance now that they're on foot."

"What's in the trunk?"

"Nothing. Rummaged bags, hovercar tool kit."

"What—"

"Nothing real," Lise said, and pointed after the footprints.

"I realize my track record on this doesn't match yours—"

"Leave it, Finn." Her eyes held his, but he could still see the tautness, the hand clenched for a blow. She walked to the half-track but he didn't follow until he'd nudged the lid. She was right—Lieutenant Okuda had been dead for years, and his corpse was in the ground somewhere or other.

"I'll drive," Lise shouted as he caught up. "You guide." She pointed to the footprints, arcing away to the northeast, more or less along the original course. Peder loped off and she shadowed, trying to keep the big machine's headlights where he could use them. After a klick, Lise pulled the truck ahead and stopped it.

"What are you doing?" Peder yelled over the howling wind as he came up along side her. Sand skittered around his feet and built up against his boot the moment he paused.

"Leaving the truck." She was tucking the shelter into the larger backpack and strapping it on.

"But we have the speed advantage, you said it yourself."

"Still do. They can only go as fast as Jamie, or carry him. We're only going as fast as you anyway, and I'm not that much slower on the hoof."

"What if we—I mean, *when* we find them, are we going to force-march them back to the truck?"

"No, Finn." She waved the map. "Worst case, we overtake them in two hours, five

klicks from the far Sector boundary. We carry them out, radio the Port with our location, and set up shelter."

"Have you noticed the storm, ma'am? It's only going to get worse."

"Armor and rebreathers."

"Our kids are out in it!"

"All the more reason we shouldn't stand here debating, or lose their tracks driving around with no visibility and navigating on hope. They're not on a straight line since the crash, or hadn't you noticed? Any more objections, Finn?"

He licked dust from his lips before answering. "It's not even our goddamn truck."

"The Frasers can bill me." Slinging her rifle, she turned toward the meandering footprints, and Peder followed.

Nessa tugged Jamie along and stared at the back of Ando's pale neck, trying to hate him to death. Her eyes were slitted against the sandy gusts, but she thought this would probably help aim her murderous gaze, which she imagined as a laser cutting his spine. She had so many things she'd like to scare him with—stories about sandstorms from the old-timers in Port Newton, where once a man had been found after a storm with his skin *blown clean off*. She wanted to tell him stories she was even now inventing about the special fury of Sector sandstorms, scare him until he begged for help and produced an emergency radio. If radios even worked here. But Jamie was frightened enough just stumbling along beside her. She wouldn't unleash her tales.

"You know we're barefoot, right? And not even wearing proper clothes?" she said instead. "I don't know what offworlders wear, but these are *pajamas*. We can't be out in a storm."

"I know, I know," Ando said, rubbing red grit from his ice-blond stubble. "I have a shelter. It's the best money can buy. Just keep up like good children, get a little more distance, and I'll set it up."

"I bet you stole it," Nessa said in a theatrically loud mutter.

Ando clapped his jacket pocket, where he'd put the pistol after Nessa convinced him Jamie would walk faster if he was marginally less terrified. "You're not so pretty anymore," he said. "Not so valuable."

Nessa bit back a retort, glancing at Jamie. He was pulling to the right with his eyes closed, letting her tow. She wondered if he was even awake.

They walked for what seemed like another hour to Nessa before Ando made a show of deciding for himself that it was time to retreat from the stinging wind. He set about putting up the shelter, which proved to be a self-inflating dome.

Nessa wanted to ask what winds the pretty, thin bubble could withstand, but she remembered Ando's gun and his rising temper, and sat quietly. She wrapped her arms around Jamie, who was already asleep sitting up. His mouth kept dropping open and collecting tiny round particles of sand until he coughed himself awake.

Ando finished his preparations and barked at the children until they followed him inside. The walls were black with large clear expanses for picture windows, and the entrance was a tunnel that quivered with the work of a small air filter. Nessa decided the filter would break just as the hovercar had, and they would suffocate to death.

Jamie lay down immediately on one side of the dome, which was the size of their living room at home. He stayed awake, coughing and staring at the ceiling. Nessa sat next to him, sure she needed to stay awake until he was asleep. After walking through the nascent storm, the shelter was oddly quiet. The sound outside was dulled, barely louder than the air filter. The dome itself creaked. It smelled new, like the big shops in Spaceport full of offworld gadgets.

Ando had just settled himself in front of the door when Nessa thought the circular room became even quieter, though the storm was still visible through the windows.

Then Jamie screamed, a high pure note. Below one of the windows crouched an immense lion, much larger than the trids and sims Nessa had seen. Its ungraceful head was as long as Jamie was tall. Its teeth and eyes seemed overlarge and luminous, the rest of it indistinct except for the claws and whipping tail.

Ando yelled too, and flailed his dusty boots against the slick floor, trying to rise. Nessa dug her fingers into Jamie's soft forearm and closed her eyes, hearing the huffing breath of the thing, its bulk shifting, the sudden pop of the floor as its weight left it.

It did not land. Its breath did not engulf them, hot and moist. Jamie had stopped screaming and Nessa opened her eyes.

"Where'd it go?" Jamie asked.

Ando, finally upright, fished the gun out of his pocket and hunkered back down, tapping the weapon against his knee.

"It wasn't real," Nessa told her brother. "It was too big. And the wrong color," she added, although she was less sure of that. "It was just a Sector ghost."

"Can Sector ghosts hurt you?" he asked.

"No," she lied. Ando's darting eyes caught hers for a moment, and she thought he knew. They used to go in after people who went into the Sector, and there'd been bodies. "Now calm down, Jamie. We'll be all right."

"Maybe you will, Nessa. You're not scared of things. But doesn't the Sector see what we're scared of? I'm scared of lots of stuff!"

His eyes were wide, and Nessa imagined she could see his terrors passing across, a parade of visions tidily arranged for the Sector's use. She wanted to shake him until he stopped thinking. "Hey, who told you that? Who said that's how the Sector works?"

Jamie shrugged.

"What do they know? It's a big *mystery*." She waved her fingers and he giggled. "Maybe the first people who came here were thinking of something they were afraid of and the Sector made that, so everyone heard about it and got frightened and thought scary thoughts from then on."

"What about the people that don't come back?"

"Maybe they dreamed nice things and didn't want to leave! You should try it. Think about horses, you like them."

Jamie squeezed his eyes shut. Nessa watched Ando mutter and quake. A half-there pair of children appeared near where she and her brother sat, ran toward the kidnapper and vanished. She studied his white face. Something he was afraid of, so she decided not to worry about it attacking them.

She didn't believe what she'd told Jamie, although she thought it was very clever of her. It *could* be true. She couldn't help, though, remembering things that had scared her: a dream that the sweet Beeples from the kids' vids wanted to eat her (not scary now that she was big); waking up and thinking she saw a dragon's shadow on the wall. She suppressed an unhappy noise when she realized the Sector couldn't bring to life her worst fear because it was already happening. She was in trouble and her parents were not coming.

"We're all gonna die."

Peder was ready for another attack, like the pair of drones they'd just repelled, or another apparition of parents screaming disapproval. The casual tone of the marine behind him he had not expected.

"We are all going to die," he repeated with emphasis. Ackerman, Peder remembered, slowing a pace to look at the fellow. A broad man with a spacer hunch, nervous and sour whenever dirt was underfoot. No one had known why he'd become a marine, and he'd only been in Peder's squad briefly—gone next time Peder woke up on the hospital ship. Transferred, Hendry'd said. Now Peder wished he'd shut up.

"Will dying shut you up?" he heard his own voice say, and looked around: there he was, painfully young, thinner than he remembered, and clean-shaven. His mouth set in a habitual smirk.

"We should have stayed with the wreck," Ackerman said. "We'll die down in these holes."

"L.T. spotted a T-Rex patrol," said a third voice, and Peder turned to see PFC Reddi, a nice enough fellow. Peder studied his dark, elegant face, an unpleasant memory nagging at him. The T-Rexes he already recalled, one of the various species in the Farj's mercenary ranks. They weren't particularly dinosaurian, but they had sets of tiny vestigial arms visible through a bubble on their power-armor. "We've got no armor on, Ack. Finding cover was the right call."

Peder fell back so he could watch his old comrades over his own shoulder. Lise, several meters ahead, threw him a disquieted look, sped up a bit. She hadn't said anything since the ghost of his father had said she was damaged, a danger to the children. His dad had never actually said that, but how much did that matter?

At least the Sector spared them the storm while the ghosts were raging—it parted around them like the Red Sea. So Peder hung back and watched these old memories the Sector had decided to throw at them. Ackerman reaching out instinctively for the invisible tunnel wall, then recoiling and flicking the mud off his hand. The young Finn, an easy sort of swing in his stride, invincible. This was the day he got wounded. Out of it for a long time, long enough during this part of the Farj War to lose most of the squad.

He looked ahead and saw now the line of backs, some in color-shifting fatigues and a few in even less, T-shirts and sweaters they'd been wearing on the transport. They carried hodgepodge packs and gear salvaged from the wreck, and every one of them had grabbed his or her weapon the instant things had gotten hairy. A splash of blood here and there where they'd tried to pull someone out who hadn't made it.

There, five up the line, was this year's Hendry, dark hair clipped in a style female Marines did not like to hear called "pixie." He had had the back of her neck memorized then: the mole on the left, the big scar marring the hairline, still red and shining.

The real Lise, the one whose outward scars were faded to smooth accustomed bumps under his caresses, had stopped moving. The ghosts bumped against her and walked past, unseeing. Peder sped up, cut ahead of himself and Ackerman, and put an arm around her.

She was holding her head. "I can't be here."

"We're not, we're in Sector 103," he soothed, as though that was a lot better.

She calmed enough to give him a dubious stare. "I know, okay? It's pretty obvious we're not in a mud tunnel. But I don't want—I can't see this again."

"Well, we'll stop. They'll keep walking."

"We're already stopped," Lise whispered. Around them, the Marines plodded on without advancing. Marching to nowhere in the eye of a storm they didn't see.

"I just hate this stuff," Ackerman whined. "This mud."

"The rest of us love it," young Finn said. "It's just like home for me."

"Really? Redrock is like this?"

Finn laughed. "Hell no, Ack, it's a desert planet. Did you fail geography as a kid?"

"Come on," the older Peder urged. "I know this is when I got hurt, I know that isn't a jolly memory for either of us, but we have to keep going, find the kids. Let's double-time it for a while, keep your mind off it." They moved into a jog, her gait slightly uneven but fast enough. The young ghosts paced them at a slow walk.

"Why're there so many of you Redrockers in the Corps, anyway?" Ack asked.

"Usual reason: bullshit," Finn replied, adjusting his heavy gun straps with a hitch of his shoulder.

"I heard about that," Reddi chimed in. He was rearguard in theory, since he'd escaped the flaming wreck with a helmet. But he wasn't entirely above chatting. "The Syndicate told us the Farj were interested in annexing Redrock, so a bunch of the colonists joined up. Then came Asturia, and we realized what Syndicate intel is worth."

"Isn't Hendry a Redrocker too?" Ack said, wagging his thick eyebrows.

"Yeah," Finn said. "She was already in the Corps though. She'll be in until they carry her out feet-first with stars on her armor."

"Are you and Hendry really . . ."

"Both from Redrock? Didn't I just say?"

"You know what I mean. What's she like?"

"Long Russian novels. Blowing shit up."

Ack rolled his eyes. "Come on."

"Look, I've got a girl who's smarter than me, prettier than me, and won't mind the climate when I take her home to Mam. Why would I fuck that up by bragging to a farj-hole like you?"

Peder smiled over at Lise, but she didn't seem to be listening. Reddi had drifted away from the conversation—Peder remembered him saying once that in-Corps relationships were bad news, kept you from making rank. Reddi'd had a boyfriend in another company for a while, and it hadn't ended well.

Ack threw an elbow. "Fuckin' dirt farmers probably do it—"

"Shut up!" Reddi hissed, and keyed a silence command to the squad's headsets—those that had them. Peder saw the young Hendry stopping a neighbor with a hand. Beyond her, Lieutenant Okuda gestured for them to hit the dirt: too late.

A chrome ball appeared from the storm behind them, flying fast. Peder watched it in fascination—in the event, he had never seen it, this seeker that had almost killed him. It must have been rolled down one of the occasional vent-holes in the tunnel by a patrol, possibly the T-Rex mercs who'd found the wreck. It flew close enough to zero them and send the coords, then blew up.

Reddi was nearest, then Finn. But it wasn't the young simulacrum who stumbled, feeling the concussive force whip along his spine, the shrapnel whiz through his left hamstring and rip his neck open. It was Peder who fell onto Ack, propelled forward by the explosion, his head cracking hard against the other man's slung rifle. He wanted to say something, like "not again" or "wrong guy," but he was too busy bleeding from his neck.

This time, two Hendrys shouted "Finn!" though only one continued, "Ack, put pressure on it, goddamn you!" He felt hands, lots of hands, and as the two Hendrys appeared—one with brown eyes unguarded, one with squint lines—he heard the corpsman, "Doc" Saab, trying to save the shattered Reddi.

"Doc, I can't stop the bleeding," the younger Hendry said. "Permission to use the last . . ." He wondered, as he fell unconscious, why one of the Hendrys wasn't bent over another Finn. Maybe he'd switched places with him. Maybe he would wake up on a hospital ship with a drawn-faced Lise at his side. Maybe the kids would be there.

Nessa woke in the shelter and couldn't get back to sleep. The shadows were thick, more than air and less than substantial. They shifted and blurred, even though the single point of light in the room was steady. Nessa tried to think pleasant thoughts. She imagined the stars coming down to dance on the domed ceiling, or horses, big ridiculous horses with shining eyes like in Jamie's stories charging through the walls to carry them home. She imagined killer robots materializing around Ando and chopping him to bits.

She tilted her head toward where she knew Ando must be, from the muttering. Still awake. She wondered if the offworlder was on something to stay awake through

the long Redrock night. He had his lantern dimmed to a useless spark and blinkered himself with both hands. Could he see or feel her looking? She snapped her eyes shut as he looked up at her and his murmur rose in a squeak of distress.

"No, no, that one's real . . ." he said and subsided.

That one is real. So other ones weren't? Other whats? She remembered the skipping figures that had rushed at Ando earlier and disappeared. She opened her eyes again to look, and screeched—a weathered skull glowed out of the darkness at her, a few centimeters from her face. She pushed back, thunked into Jamie, and batted the thing away from her. It bounced across the room to illuminate, for a moment, a pair of bare feet, small shins, a knee decorated with an upside-down smiley-face. Then the skull faded, and she felt Ando's hands on her shoulders.

"Do you want me to shoot you?" His voice was hoarse.

"No, I—there was a skull!" Nessa's voice rose. "You brought us here to this awful place and now you're upset that it scares us?"

"You're easily scared!"

Nessa wanted to say she wasn't scared of him, but she knew she *was* scared of the gun.

"You want to see something? Little girl, little loud girl, little fighter?" He pulled Nessa with him to his nest of coats and bags, grabbed the lantern from the floor, and spun the control. Light burned into Nessa's eyes, and the impression of children, maybe a dozen, standing around the edge of the dome. Some were younger than Jamie; one, the girl with the decorated knee, was older. They didn't even look at Nessa, and she knew they couldn't be breathing, couldn't be warm human forms that got uncomfy and moved, or smacked their lips, or burped, or she'd have heard them in the darkness.

She met Jamie's confused eyes across the space, and willed him to stay calm.

"They're waiting for me to sleep," Ando said with a spray of spittle, "and then the knives will come out. Yes, I remember this dream. I know what you want. I know everything! I know what I'm doing, and I had to do it!" His eyes refocused on Nessa, and he said, "So don't tell me about 'scared,' little girl!" He gave her a shove and slammed the lantern back to dark so she missed her footing and fell.

She felt her way to Jamie and gathered him in, still seeing the faces around her, beautiful children of all worlds and colors, faces turned toward Ando with infinite patience.

A real stasis kit put you out of it, Peder remembered, or rather didn't remember. In his memory, there was nothing between the confusion and pain of his wound and awakening, clean and warm and relatively whole, on the *Glasgow*. But now he woke up on his side in the stasis box. He could peer out through the heavy plastic coffin, but not talk or move. He felt fine apart from that. Maybe the Sector didn't know how stasis boxes worked, or maybe it liked having a larger audience.

The stasis box was leaned up against nothing at all in the empty space within the storm. Presumably the ghostly marines had angled it so they could see the faceplate and any warning lights that might flash. Nearby he could see a body bag—Reddi—and his Lise, face red with frustration. She kicked his stasis box, but he didn't feel any vibration. She dropped to put her shoulder against it and heave, but it didn't budge. That explained the rage, not to mention the furrows in the sand around him. Finally she slid down, arm draped over the foot of the box, and they watched the dead fight.

"We can't keep on going. This tunnel leads into enemy territory," Cheung said.

"It's *all* enemy territory under the ground," Hendry said. "Being fuzzy on that concept is what got us shot down half-dressed. The L.T. and Martinez will get a message through on the surface, don't you doubt it."

"I guess they might send someone to pick up the lieutenant, even if there's only a handful of us grunts besides," Cheung grinned.

"They should have been back already," Ack said, rubbing the glued cut on his hand that was his only takeaway from the seeker explosion.

"I know it's been a hard day and we've lost some people, but Lieutenant Okuda will see us through."

Ack nodded and turned his back, assuming a vigilant posture, probably peering down a slick-walled tunnel, if Peder's memories of VK-3 held.

Cheung had always had a deck of cards on him, whether he was on patrol or on a transport falling out of the sky. But apparently Okuda had left orders: food, rest, or guard duty only. From the confines of their restless pacing, Peder could get an idea of the space, a rough oval with guards posted at one o'clock and five. Smaller than the transport ward room, long enough that you had to speak up to converse across the length. Doc Saab was using a crate as a seat, and had set up a stretcher-cot as a table to organize their food and supplies.

"This it for chow?" Crowe asked Doc Saab, quietly as if there was anyone to avoid upsetting.

"That depends on how many more meals we eat," said the little corpsman with a vaguely professorial air that Finn remembered finding annoying. He'd been a recalled reservist, called back from doing private sector prosthesis tech or something, so he was older than most of the enlisted. Not really a doctor, but what medic was?

"But the L.T. is getting us a ride—we don't have to skimp."

Saab, the smallest of them, shrugged. "Then you will be able to mock my caution over a hot meal in no time."

Crowe grunted and sat down heavily with his ration of carb and chlorophyll. "Wish Martinez were back," he said to Cheung. "She could sweet-talk a decent meal out of a Farj, let alone the Doc."

"When that pickup comes, it had better carry apologies and leave-time as well as a hot meal," Cheung said. "Crouching in this hole without so much as a turtle shell on my back is not a high point for me."

"If they'd've known the Farj's guys had EMP-nets laid, they wouldn't have sent us over that quad," Crowe said.

"But they should've known. Crawlers supposed to've been all over this sector."

Crowe gestured with a ball of gummy ration rice. "Like Hendry said, the tunnels were down here and the brass didn't know. They must have snuck an EMP-net into place through these."

Cheung rolled his eyes. "What's stopping them sneaking one anywhere on the mudball then? Anywhere we think is clean? Why not some of the bioweapons they're supposedly building here? Why not gas us all to death the minute we set up camp?"

"It's useless to try to second-guess the tactics of the Farj and their diverse mercenaries," Doc said. "And more than useless to impute godlike powers to them. We found out about their facilities here early on in their anti-human operation: it's unlikely that they've settled on a single bioweapon design, and grossly improbable that they're at mass manufacture."

"Great," Cheung smiled. "Individually crafted prototypes then, no two the same. We'll be on this planet 'til Judgment Day."

"As long as it takes," Saab said with a frown, and the private subsided.

Johnson nodded as she licked the last food off her wrapper. She swallowed once. "Corporal Saab is right. VK-3 is important. We have to get the job done."

"My job isn't running from a couple of T-Rexes because I don't have proper armor," Cheung grumbled.

"VK-3 is worth some sacrifice," Saab said, tallying their sparse medical supplies

on a tablet. “To us, the elimination of the bioweapon threat to our colonies and armies—to the Farj, should we prevail, a loss of highly paid specialists and a huge research outlay.”

Johnson screwed up her broad face. “You make it sound so . . .”

“Bloodless? That is how the Farj fight. How can it be otherwise, when they sit at home and send out proxies? But once the expense of mercenaries and materiel outstrip the potential profit—”

“Or they realize the Syndicate’s all over their trade partners, sucking at their money faucet,” Cheung added.

Saab nodded. “As soon as that tipping—”

Peder saw Lise, standing just outside the circle of enlisted, lift her head like a cat noting a sound. She took a tentative step toward her double, who flicked a hand-sign at the seated marines. They quieted and hands went to rifles, heavy guns, sidearms.

“The lieutenant!” Young Hendry hissed. The other ghosts crowded forward as Hendry helped Okuda support Martinez into the circle of her comrades and onto the cot.

Lise shook her head, backed away from the wounded woman and the others a few steps, staying within the walls that were not there. Her younger self returned reluctantly to her guard post.

Okuda wiped his brow and scrubbed at his salt-and-pepper buzz cut. “We sent the encrypted request, but we ran into some sort of proximity sensor on the way back. Martinez took it out, but it shot a couple of these into her first.” He held up a plastic sample bulb containing something dark, the size and shape of a stylus point.

“Flechette?” Saab asked, seizing the sample. “Very primitive though—not aerodynamic. Unusual for Farja weapon design.”

“Maybe one of those prototypes,” Crowe said, frowning at Cheung as if he’d invented the things.

“Perhaps,” Saab replied.

Martinez cleared her throat, and the marines leaned forward. She had been a favorite, Peder remembered. Good at impressions, and organized baseball games for those in the platoon who came from baseball worlds and cultures. “I felt fine at first, Doc. But I got real dizzy after 15 or 20 . . . got so I couldn’t tell up from down. Had to close my eyes not to puke.” She looked down. “The L.T. had to carry me.”

Saab’s eyes widened innocently, as they always did when he changed magnification, and he bent toward her cheek, where the puncture wounds showed angry red and white pustules with tentacles of swelling. “Histamines,” he muttered, and started sorting through his boxes.

“Can you fix it?” Cheung asked.

“Let the doc work,” Okuda said.

Cheung saluted. “Yessir.”

“Did you get these chumps’ future hazard bonuses yet, Cheung?” Martinez wheezed.

“Nah, L.T. said no cards.”

“Far be it from me to question,” Martinez said, and cleared the sludge from her throat again.

Saab motioned to the lieutenant and they retired a few meters from the clustered marines, closer to Peder.

“—some sort of nano-tech, modifying her organs for its own purpose.”

“We’ve never seen that. Has to be human-specific, right?”

“Oh yes, or at least programmed with human contingencies. It’s not unlike what most viruses or bacteria do: use the host’s body to replicate—”

“But what can you do about it, Doc?”

"Not much, really. These are primitive conditions even for the field. I can't even try to remove them apheretically—I don't have the equipment." Saab stroked the beard he no longer had. "I can try to make it less unpleasant—treat the symptoms. Unless your rescue arrives soon, though, we may find out whether this is a perfected lethal creation, or just an experiment that the Farj's researchers released when we began advancing on their base."

"Could stasis buy us more time?"

Saab grimaced, "Certainly, if we had another unit. We used the last one on Private Finn." They both glanced down at Peder.

Saab's voice had been creeping back to normal volume, and Ackerman, supposedly guarding the opening beyond Peder's box, had been inching closer. Now, he broke out in defiance of all order, "You mean *Hendry* used it on Finn! Everyone knows they're BWOL! Of course she used it on him." His voice was high and angry, and all the others stared, even Martinez.

Peder saw Hendry's ears go back. "Emphasis on 'while on leave,'" she said in controlled tones. "We seem on leave to you?"

Okuda recovered from his surprise. "Corporal Hendry's registered off-duty relationship is just about as little of your business as my conversation with Corporal Saab. Get back to your post before I stop feeling sorry for you because you've lost half your team today." He shut his eyes for a second, probably remembering that Martinez was the only other member of Ack's team still standing.

Ack pulled himself up straight. "Sir, yes sir!"

Martinez tugged on Cheung's hand. "Hey, if we're only supposed to save the lives of people we're banging," she said in an exaggeratedly cheerful voice that sounded gruesome coming out of her blotched, distorted face, "then I got a lot of back-nookie coming. Cheung, didn't I lean on your jugular at Asturia? Gimme a little sugar." She rocked on her elbow, and Crowe lowered her back down.

"Doc?" he called.

"I'm coming, Private." Saab threw a glance at Okuda before hurrying over.

Martinez was blocked by a wall of backs, most of them smeared muddy gray-green from sitting against the walls. When Peder could see her for a moment, he wished he hadn't. No matter what Saab administered, her pain didn't seem to fade. Her stoicism did, and by the time Peder gave up watching, she was squeezing out an animal keen with each breath. Crowe and Cheung fell back, and Johnson sat nearby, her eyes firmly on the beacon that refused to flash and tell them rescue was near.

Peder looked at the Hendrys: his Lise sitting down, the real sand of Redrock piling into berms around her as she fidgeted. The younger Hendry faced away from Martinez, dutifully standing guard. Her jaw clenched with every whimper. Was this what she wouldn't talk about, to him or to the Corps shrinks?

"What is the point of this?" Lise asked. Very like Nessa somehow, to assume there was one.

All at once, Lise stood up, put on her rebreather and walked through the notional door her younger self guarded, then out of the bubble of calm air into the storm.

Peder was at first too shocked even to mentally curse. You didn't leave a fellow marine behind, let alone your friend, your partner, your spouse. He was forming this into words with some "goddamns" and "for fuck's sakes" for emphasis when she reappeared, sand rolling off her shoulders and arms. She fell to the ground beside the stasis box and rested her head against its surface. "I hope you never find out about that, Finn," she muttered, then jumped as Martinez started screaming full-throatedly, screams that seemed to hit more than one note and to rip up the whole voicebox. It was a voice too low and harsh to belong to affable Martinez. Okuda was holding her hand now, and he showed it to Saab, then said something in an undertone.

The young Hendry checked the tunnel and exchanged glances with the lieutenant. She ducked out—probably checking to make sure nothing had been attracted by the sound. Lise got to her feet, made as if to follow, doubled back. Her own rifle was unslung, and she looked at the safety, Peder’s stasis box, anywhere but at Martinez.

The sick woman was thrashing now, and Saab was explaining about extremities. Peder watched a hand flail by, and it looked almost frostbitten, withered. Then the screaming broke—the voice, but not the pain he thought—and a wet noise came from the cot. A red-black spray, a universal stepping back and crying out.

Cheung stumbled to a corner to be sick, and Finn tried not to see the remnant of Martinez on the cot. Saab bent over, defeated and bloody. They were all bloody, all touching their chests and faces gingerly.

“Nothing moving that I could detect, sir,” said Hendry as she walked back in.

Lise, who had been frozen by the stasis box, made a gesture toward her younger self as if she could keep her back. The lieutenant made a similar gesture, but this one worked. Both Hendrys froze, eyes on Martinez’s body, hands holding identical rifles.

“God,” Hendry said. “I mean . . .”

“Martinez didn’t make it, Corporal,” Okuda said, and lifted his hands. Peder realized that there were black dart-points embedded in his palms. He didn’t have to say that they wouldn’t make it either.

If Ando could stay awake, Nessa could too. She lay on her side, curled quiet as a kitten, but *she* knew she was a lion waiting to strike. She would wait for him to fall asleep and then, something. Something. When she got sleepy, she pinched the skin on her inner arm, or pushed her tongue into the sealed tooth sockets until the pain was too great for the numbing agent. Her opponent remained bent over his tiny light, whispering.

Nessa’s eyes began to drift from the man’s half-lit face, then close. A noise, a curious repetitive noise, kept her from the dark. It was coming closer. She pinched the bruising skin of her arm and twisted, but she barely needed the pain. Something was happening.

Ando heard it too. He rose to his feet, his monologue rising likewise. He cranked up his lantern: the circle of phantom children had disappeared. “What now, what worse, what is it?” Nessa heard him say. Behind her, Jamie slept on. She stayed still.

“Kids? Kids!” It was Dad’s voice. Nessa couldn’t help twitching, putting her hand down on the floor of the shelter to push herself to her feet.

Ando shook his finger at her and silently stooped for his gun, which had been tucked under his leg where he sat. He aimed it in her direction and raised a finger to his lips.

Nessa was not going to listen. She’d call out when she heard her parents at the door, warn them—what? That he had a gun, that he was on their right? She had no chance to decide before they were there, Peder leading, his big Corps rifle at the ready. Ando shrank back at their sudden appearance. Lise, rifle slung, turned toward the children, arms wide and face full of love and worry. Peder brought down the butt of his weapon toward Ando’s head, but the kidnapper’s cringe carried him out of the way and he took the blow heavily on the shoulder instead.

Ando yelped, raised his gun and fired from a half-crouch. The bullet ripped through Peder’s heavy jacket. His blood spattered the smooth walls of the shelter. Jamie started awake with a yell at the noise, and Nessa screamed as if she’d never stop. Her father fell toward Ando, who shoved his toppling body roughly aside and took aim at Lise’s back.

“No!” Jamie and Nessa both cried, and Jamie tried to stand up. Nessa’s hand flailed, trying to pull him back down to her. The kidnapper fired and her mother fell. Jamie threw himself on the body.

Nessa quivered. "No! This can't happen," she said. She stared at Ando, stunned Ando who looked no more certain than she. "I should have warned them, you—it's my fault. I should have—I heard . . . I heard something." The girl stumbled to her feet and pushed toward the clear window in the shelter wall. Outside, she could see the tall shapes of horses, glowing with magic in the desert night as they did in Jamie's stories and vids. "Horses!" she shouted in a strange mix of triumph and rage. "*Horses!* Jamie, it isn't real, it isn't Mam, come away!" She started tugging at her brother as the body under his sobbing face began to lose its form and let him gently down, no more substantial than smoke.

Peder stared from the flechette-riddled lieutenant to the medical corpsman, to blank-faced Crowe fingering the holes on his neck and chin where his own blood mixed with Martinez's. Was this how all these people had died? Lise had told him Okuda died taking VK-3, sure, but she'd let him think it was in the messy weeks after this. Who had she said had bit it this day? Just Saab? How many half-truths had she spun around this?

When Peder looked back to the Hendrys, there was only one: his wife, standing to attention several meters from Okuda. Across the room, Ackerman slumped against the wall, untouched but unable to speak.

"I'm so sorry, sir," Lise said, and her voice was barely audible over Cheung's panicked breathing and Johnson's sobs.

"Saab. Corporal Saab, is there anything—" the lieutenant's voice trailed off. Saab's face was already swollen and discolored under its coat of gore.

"I'm already experiencing vertigo: it seems that it progresses faster the more contaminants have entered the system," the medic said, eyes wide. He fumbled for an injector. "I suspect I have the highest concentration, especially given my relatively smaller volume—" His glassy eyes refocused on the lieutenant. "No, sir. Nothing we can do. I don't even have enough opiates left to take the edge off, let alone provide . . . graceful exits."

"Graceful exits?" Johnson said. "Do you mean we're going to die?"

"Private—" Hendry started, but Johnson interrupted.

"You're not dying, Corporal. Maybe you got more protocol left than I do."

"We have certainly been infected with the same nano-tech weapon that killed Martinez," Saab said. "It's only reasonable—" He stopped to cough a gluey but unproductive cough. "The infection may vary in speed, reactions may—" He swayed, tried to catch himself with the cot, and fell heavily onto his crate.

He and Johnson looked at each other. Few of the telltale holes were visible on her, but her face and hands were already swollen. With her knuckles smoothed, her cheeks filled in, and her dark skin shiny-taut, she looked younger than her nineteen years.

"Very quick reaction," Saab wheezed up at her. "Robust immune response. Your own body will kill you first—"

"Doc," Hendry said, not meeting Johnson's eyes. "Is there nothing you can give the private?"

"I expended the antihistamines in my attempts to treat Martinez. If you had your combat kits, there'd be a supply of epinephrine, but . . ." He coughed again and stared at his boots, a fan of mud dried on the tops of the toes.

Hendry spun to the lieutenant. "Sir? Sir."

Okuda had slid down a wall, Peder supposed from his unbalanced posture.

"Sir," Hendry said softly, "I need orders." She put out a hand, then withdrew it. "Me and Ackerman, sir, what should we do?"

Okuda lifted his face but didn't reply.

"Hendry," one of the men slumped against the wall called, and she left the lieu-

tenant. Crowe's hand shook as he pointed to Johnson. She had fallen at Saab's feet and was trying to push herself back up.

"Saab! Goddammit, help!" Hendry hauled Johnson up to a sitting.

"I can't—breathe," she rasped as Hendry wiped the mud off her face. Her generous lips were swollen to a fish-pout.

"Can't help," Saab stumbled to his feet and made for the far exit where Ackerman still stood, trying to hide his tears.

"Ack, stop him!" Hendry shouted.

"How?"

"You're a marine, work it out!"

"I can't breathe. Gonna die," Johnson said, clutching Hendry's hand. The corporal pulled away instinctively.

"Please, Private, let me pass!" Corporal Saab said. "I'm no help. I'm a danger to you."

Ackerman stood in the door, posture more assured than his face. Hendry covered the room in a few strides and gingerly took Saab by the shoulder—her grip made him groan. "Doc, please. She's in a bad way." Her face twisted with the irony of the words. As the medic trailed back to Johnson, Ackerman murmured, "What if he's right? He *is* a danger, right, Corporal? They all are."

"We can't just let them wander off to die alone. Besides, what if they find more of our forces and infect them? What if they find the rescue transport?" She glanced at the unhelpful beacon. "What if they double back and bump into us just as—" she made an expansive gesture with one hand.

"What do we do, then?" Ack's face was creased, supplicatory.

Hendry clapped him on the shoulder and turned away. Peder knew her well enough to see that she was just as desperate for guidance.

Saab was muttering over Johnson, trying to lead her in a relaxation exercise, but her eyes were still wild and her breaths were close, frantic sips of air.

Crowe and Cheung were hunkered down together, eyes on Johnson, their rookie rifle. Okuda had fallen into a fetal position, his face already blotchy. He hadn't made a sound, and his hands looked normal enough. Hendry kneeled beside him.

"Sir, Ackerman and I need to know what to do. There's been no word from rescue, no sign of T-Rex movement. This is the situation right now, sir, here in this room. Saab can't help you, and you and the others—you saw Martinez. Is there anything I can *do* for you, sir?"

Okuda cocked his head, opened his mouth. Blood from his bitten lip crept up the teeth. "Get out. Ackerman . . . both get out."

Hendry looked down at her C.O., who was starting to shudder. "Sir, you know what you're asking? What I'd be leaving you to? Please, sir, give the order."

Okuda's eyes closed, and he laid his head back in the desert sand that stood in for the green mud of VK-3. Hendry looked around. Johnson was still, her swollen hands folded over her heart. Saab was far gone, beginning to keen, holding his hands up to his face. Maybe watching for the wasting that had shriveled Martinez's.

"Hendry," Peder wanted to say, "this isn't your responsibility. Get out while you can."

She looked at his stasis tube, straight at him as though she could hear. He wondered if she'd done that fourteen years ago, or if this was his Lise breaking through the nightmare of memory.

"It's all right to run," he thought, the sort of thing you tell a child, not what you'd expect a woman like Corporal Hendry to believe.

Hair falling across her face, Hendry leaned over the lieutenant, took something from his belt, and stood up. Before Peder could close his eyes, she shot the lieutenant with his sidearm: two to the head.

"What the fuck?" screamed Ackerman, and ran past Peder. Hendry deflected his

wild blow and shoved him. He stumbled over the convulsing Saab and flailed to his feet.

"What are you doing, Hendry?"

"What someone has to, Private. Get out of the way."

Ackerman kneeled, spreading his arms in front of Saab. "The orders were—I heard it, not for this!"

"The orders were chickenshit. I'm not leaving them behind to die slow."

"It's not your call!"

"Whose is it then? I don't see any fucking rockers on your sleeve, Ack."

Ackerman's voice was tight. "You just executed your commanding officer! That's mutiny! That doesn't give you the right to—"

Saab's groans gave way to screams, and one of his hands—wizened and blue—hit Ackerman's ankle. As the marine lurched sideways and recovered, Hendry took a step and fired at Saab. Black specks bubbled out of his chest with the blood.

"Get away from him, Ack."

Ackerman stumbled away, to his post, to his rifle. Hendry started to turn toward Crowe and Cheung—Crowe was nodding slowly, Cheung hiding his face in his friend's shoulder—then hesitated. Of course she hesitated, she knew what was coming. Peder could have told her it wouldn't hurt any less the second time. Ack's bullet went wild and hit the floor, but the rifle ammo was explosive. The blast knocked her off her feet, and she shrieked as the sole of her boot burned away and metal ripped the pad of her foot. She turned, lying in black and white armor on red sand, and faced the muddy phantom. Her voice was raw from the scream.

"This makes you so much better?"

Peder saw him pause, snot glistening on his stubbled lip. His rifle pulled left for a moment, and Hendry aimed from the ground. The pistol fired inert rounds, so maybe he'd kept the hand. The heavy rifle stock dropped.

Hendry pulled herself up on the stasis tube and hobbled toward Crowe and Cheung.

"I'm sorry," she said, raising the gun.

"Don't be," Crowe said, and Peder shut his eyes.

Afterward, Hendry pulled Ack up. "I'm going to tell them," he spat. "I'm going to tell them everything."

"Go the fuck ahead," Hendry said as she positioned a cushion bandage on his ragged assortment of fingers. "Somebody has to."

The bandage, the hand, and the marine disappeared, and Peder fell to the ground, free and unhurt. The sandstorm had died outside the circle of the Sector's little drama. He expected Lise to notice he was there, to run to him on two whole feet, but she stayed kneeling in the sand, hands clutching each other. As he approached, he realized she was crying.

"Lise . . ."

Lise turned up her face, sun-dark and tear-blotted in the light from his headset. "Peder, you're all right? You were—"

"I saw everything. This time I saw."

She tried to swallow her sobs, as if she resented her own tears. "I killed them. I killed our squad."

"Yeah, you did. But you didn't leave them behind. You didn't leave *me* behind, a gift-wrapped test subject for the Farj. *You survived*. I get why you couldn't tell me, but . . ."

"I thought I knew what I was offering up when I joined. My life, my innocence maybe. I thought I could do that for everyone else. I didn't think I'd have to give up—" She trailed off, unable to find a word for it. "I thought I'd be a soldier, not a murderer. I was willing to die for my brother, I never thought I would kill him."

Peder took her head in his long, callused fingers and laid it on his armored shoulder. "You're not a murderer, Lise. You're not. But no one knows what they're offering up in this life, love. No one."

This time, Ando did not jerk back to wakefulness when his head fell over the lantern. Nessa counted breaths—ten seemed like a responsible interval to her—and got up. She was halfway to Ando when she realized she was not the only one walking. The silent host of children was back. Barefoot in nightshirts and pajamas, they padded beside her. Knives gleamed in every hand.

"Wait," she whispered to the nearest phantom, easy to see with her night-adjusted eyes and the soft glow from their weapons. The girl's skin was dark, and she had huge eyes that were pale, maybe golden. "Let me get the gun." She was ready to plead, but without waiting for another word, the tightening ring of children loosened a step. Nessa walked forward alone into the circle of his dim light, so close to her enemy that she could hear his breath.

She had seen him tuck the gun under his leg on the right side, and there it was, the handle sticking out. He was leaning left in his sleep, but even so, as she pressed her fingers around the grip and began to pull, she expected to feel his hand on her wrist, tight as it had been on her shoulder.

She did not. The gun came free and hung heavy from her fingers. It looked less small in her hand. The night moved around her, the ghost children closing in, and she fled back to Jamie. She crouched between Ando and her sleeping brother, resting the butt on the shelter floor.

A knife rose and fell, and Ando shrieked. There was a noise and the lantern light bobbed, then flared to its full radiance. The children looked no less substantial, their knives no less menacing. Nessa watched as they regrouped from Ando's counterattack and circled, more graceful and regular than any children she knew.

Ando stood in their midst, spinning and yelling. "I never hurt you! I never did! I had to take care of myself, and what happened to you after wasn't my fault! How could it be, when it happened to me too? I turned out all right!"

The knives drove inward, and he screeched as they scored his skin. Jamie was awake behind Nessa. "Cover your eyes," she said.

The children took another synchronized step, another individual taking his place before Ando. The kidnapper's hectic smile dipped at one side, was gathered in by champing teeth, was dropped entirely. Ando feinted left, then dropped out of view and howled. "My gun! You hobgoblins! You took my gun!" He straightened again, too late to avoid the half-dozen slashing blows that seemed more meant to hurt and madden than destroy.

His eyes rolled in their whites like trapped animals' did in nature trids, and they happened to catch on Nessa. "You!" he said. "You took it! You're in league with them!"

The children struck again, but Ando swept two aside with a punch and they melted back, as if unsure what to do with their ritual interrupted. They faded as Ando stepped toward the real children.

"Stay back!" Nessa said, brandishing the pistol.

"That's a very expensive weapon, little girl. I don't know that you'll fetch its price, now that you're roughed up." He took another step.

"I said, stay back!" Nessa shouted, and squeezed the trigger. The bullet passed through the wall of the shelter, past Ando, and his false grimacing smile widened.

"The shelter is even more expensive." The air filter's whine pitched up a note.

"Then stay away!"

Ando took another step, his hands flexing almost involuntarily. "It's you, you brat. The visions, the blood, it's all your fault! Everything's gone wrong, you broke my hovercar, you're one of them! A devil, not a child!"

"You take one more step and I'll shoot you!" she said, not sparing a glance for whimpering Jamie. She lined up the sights and aimed them, as best as she could with her heart and lungs throwing her arms around, at Ando's bloody chest. She tried not to remember the bullets tearing through her parents' images. Fire on an ex-hale, she remembered her mother saying. Pretend you're not pulling the trigger yet.

"Put your hands on your head," she heard, and it was not her voice, but her mother's. Ando stepped back as the dusty figure emerged from the shelter airlock, followed by her father.

Her father advanced on Ando. "Hands find your head, farj-hole, or my bullet does."

Ando raised his hands and interlaced the fingers behind his snarled hair. He dropped to his knees without being asked, and began to snivel against the curving wall of the shelter as Peder dug something out to tie him with.

Lise dropped her rifle and pulled off her rebreather. She bent and held her arms wide, and Jamie ran to her. Nessa stayed rigid, pistol held out, following Ando with the sights.

"No, Nessie." Lise put her hand over her daughter's on the weapon and eased it from her grip. "You don't have to kill him. We don't have to kill anyone today."

The girl watched her mother's scraped, dusty hand take the gun, and stepped forward into her embrace.

"I'm proud of you, Nessie," Lise said. "Thank you for taking care of your brother."

Nessa let the weight of her head fall on her mother's shoulder. "What will happen to him? To Ando?" she whispered.

"We're not too far from the edge of the Sector. We'll take him with us under arrest."

"More walking?" Jamie said, with a wobbling chin that would usually have made Nessa roll her eyes. Now she reached out and put her arm around his rounded shoulders.

"You heard her," Nessa said softly. "It's only a little farther!"

Peder left his secured prisoner in a corner and wrapped his arms around his family. Lise looked at him across Jamie's curls, exhausted but beaming with relief, tears still wet in the pale lines beside her brown eyes.

"More afraid of a little hike than the Sector ghosts?" Lise asked softly, brushing a kiss onto her son's forehead.

Jamie shrugged and snuggled closer. "Not afraid of lions now you're here. Nessa said you'd save us and you did. Still have to walk though."

"There might be things *other* than lions," Nessa said with a trace of her usual self-importance, but added, "but they aren't real, and Mam and Dad can protect us."

"And as for the walking," Peder said, squeezing Jamie's arm, "we'll carry you if we have to, Jamie boy. We always do what we have to." O

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NEXT ISSUE

AUGUST ISSUE

Stoke up the summer heat with our action-packed August issue! John W. Campbell Award finalist **Gord Sellar's** novelette thrusts us into battle as the far future "Bernoulli's War" rages. Here, lives may last for nanoseconds, but a tenuous connection with humanity remains. In a new short story set in her Xuya continuity, Nebula-nominated **Aliette de Bodard's** Mexica warriors brutally haze a young pilot. But if they don't kill her first, she just may discover the "Starsong." In new writer **Jason Sanford's** novelette, a strange religious cult does its best to ensure Earth's destruction and all that stands in their way is an astronaut stranded on "Heaven's Touch"; new writer **Indrapramit Das'** novelette takes us to a tidal-locked planet with its own bloody history. After a journey into Twilight, it soon becomes clear why many of the inhabitants "Weep for Day." Extreme competition reaches an all-new level in **Ian Creasey's** riveting novelette about "Joining the High Flyers."

ALSO IN AUGUST

World Fantasy Award winner **Theodora Goss** brings us a short story about a scientist seriously compromising her experiment in "Beautiful Boys"; Nebula and Hugo Award finalist **Bruce McAllister's** short story reveals that even the Arcturians know you can learn a lot about a society from its "Stamps"; and after a thirty-one year absence from our pages, Hugo Award finalist **Ted Reynolds** returns with a short tale about an L5 hospital patient's remarkable "View Through the Window."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

In a Reflections column reminiscent of Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, **Robert Silverberg** explores the eternal dustup between Big-Endians/Little-Endians, **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net column asks "What Is Reality?," and we'll have **Peter Heck's** On Books column; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. So get out of the pool and look for our August issue on sale at newsstands on June 19, 2012. Or subscribe to *Asimov's*—in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com*'s Kindle and KindleFire, *BarnesandNoble.com*'s Nook, *ebookstore.sony.com*'s eReader and from *Zinio.com*!

REAMDE**By Neal Stephenson****William Morrow, \$35.00 (hc)****ISBN: 978-0-06-210642-1**

This near-future thriller finds Stephenson throwing plot twist on top of plot twist, with a large cast of characters chasing one another across three continents.

The tale begins with a family Thanksgiving celebration, where Richard Forthrust, a former dope smuggler who's become a fabulously wealthy online game developer, meets a younger relative, Zula and learning of her training as a geologist, offers her a job with the company. One of the key features of the game, T'rain, is that gold and other treasures are dispersed around the game world in geologically accurate fashion. He also meets her boyfriend, Peter, a fairly amoral hacker.

Stephenson spends a chapter building up Richard's background, including the general history of the game. It's a fun background the author manages to make interesting in its own right. The plot goes into overdrive when Peter makes a deal with a shady character to deliver a batch of data to be sold to spammers. In the process, he unknowingly passes along a virus—REAMDE—that sets the rest of the plot in motion.

I'm not going to attempt a summary of over one thousand pages of plot. The book is so plot-heavy that giving away any large portion of the goings-on risks spoiling some of the surprises. There are any number of points, every couple of hundred pages, where the reader could justifiably assume that things are winding down just to have Stephenson throw a bomb—sometimes literally—into the middle of things, starting a new set of complications. To give an idea of just how wide-ranging the story is, I'll note

that the cast includes Russian mobsters, Chinese hackers, a couple of world-famous fantasy writers, Islamic terrorists, spies from at least three nations, game designers, survivalists, and a large number of interesting cannon fodder. Several of them die fairly spectacularly along the way.

Zula is at the center of much of the action, and Stephenson's demonstrated willingness to kill off characters he's spent time building up gives weight to the threats against her. He has also refined the time-honored technique of ending parts of the story on a cliff-hanger, cutting away to another group of characters whom he proceeds to get into trouble, leading up to another cliff-hanger. Edgar Rice Burroughs was a master of this, but Stephenson's definitely got the method down.

Much of the fun for SF readers is that the game, which has numerous fantasy elements, plays a major role in the evolution of the plot. It's particularly amusing when Richard takes one of his fantasy novelists into the virtual reality space of the game to show him how it works, compared to the plot material the novelist has been supplying the game developers.

Stephenson's readership nowadays stretches well beyond the core SF audience. But his work remains rooted in the characteristic values of SF: worldbuilding and focus on ideas. When these are combined, as in REAMDE, with strong storytelling, the mixture is hard to resist.

THE BOOK OF CTHULHU**Edited by Ross E. Lockhart****Night Shade, \$15.99 (tp)****ISBN: 978-1-59780-232-1**

The lasting influence of H.P. Lovecraft's fiction is on display in this anthology, collecting modern stories set in the

July 2012

“Cthulhu mythos” territory laid out by HPL and his many imitators.

The central trope of Lovecraftian horror—to use the most convenient genre basket into which to load his fiction—is that Earth was in the unthinkably distant past inhabited by alien beings that we can only conceive of as divinities; the Elder Gods, as they are often called. These inhuman powers lurk in obscure corners of the world or in alternate dimensions, biding their chance to return and feast on the pathetic creatures who have inherited their world: us.

Lovecraft’s disciples, notably August Derleth, who edited his fiction and tried to rationalize the “Cthulhu mythos,” have had a field day with that premise. It especially seems to appeal to the young, who have come into a world inhabited by elder beings with enormous power that seems to be wielded arbitrarily and to the detriment of the wishes of said young. It is no coincidence that prayers in many religions assign their deities the status of parents. But as several more recent authors—including many of those in this volume—have recognized, the resonances of the mythos go way beyond the primal chill of late night horror tales.

The stories here show just how far we’ve come from Lovecraft’s original inspiration. A few of the writers adopt the New England setting of the original tales, notably Brian McNaughton’s “The Doom That Came to Innsmouth,” almost a direct sequel to one of HPL’s best known stories. But Charles Stross’s “A Colder War,” an alternate history of post-World War II international relations; Kage Baker’s “Calamari Curls,” set in a California beach town undergoing a tourism boom; Elizabeth Bear’s “Shoggoths in Bloom,” where the creatures of the mythos are investigated by a scientist; and Gene Wolfe’s “Lord of the Land,” which sets its horrors against a Faulkner-like atmosphere, illustrate just how freely and imaginatively the modern authors can interpret the material.

There’s also a considerable metaphor-

ical reach among the stories. Lovecraft, writing in the 1920s, was suspicious of the modern world and extremely conservative in his attitude toward “lesser races.” Not surprisingly, the newer writers come at the material from a very different perspective. Several of them use the mythic potential of Lovecraft’s pantheon to comment on social issues like racism, the legacy of slavery, and the bloated security apparatus of the modern state. The effectiveness of the mythos in conveying these viewpoints is evidence that its depth and power are greater than its creator grasped—an ironic testimony of how a writer’s inspiration can bear fruit far different from his own.

Finally, while Lovecraft’s creation of the mythos was a visionary leap few other writers have equaled, his writing is nowadays something of an acquired taste—possibly best acquired before age sixteen or so. Nobody could argue that the writers in this volume are all fine stylists, but the best of them (Wolfe is the obvious example) bring a sensitive ear and a verbal facility that makes the old material shine as never before.

A treat for anyone who has ever felt the aura of the Elder Gods and their minions.

ALIEN CONTACT **Edited by Marty Halpern** **Night Shade, \$15.99 (tp)** **ISBN: 978-1-59780-281-9**

Another Night Shade anthology, this one featuring stories in which humanity and some extraterrestrial species make their first acquaintance. The theme is quintessential SF material, first mined by H.G. Wells in *War of the Worlds*, and touched on by almost every writer in the genre in the years since.

For this volume, Halpern chooses stories published over the last forty years or so, by many of the top writers working in the genre. A fair number are award nominees. And, in keeping with the rich possibilities of the subject, the approach ranges from utterly chilling (Stephen King’s “I Am the Doorway”) to outright

spoof (Charles Stross's "MAKO Signals"). Ursula K. Le Guin brings her sharp social observation to "First Contact with the Gorgonoids," with the unexpected bonus of a humorous angle—a reader who came across the story without an author's name attached might take it as a Connie Willis piece.

The settings are varied, as well, from Neil Gaiman's evocation of the London of the 1980s, as seen by an awkward teenage boy, to Michael Swanwick's primitive world where the human settlers interact with predatory aliens—who have adopted a survival strategy the humans are unaware of. Harry Turtledove also shows the first contact from the viewpoint of aliens who come to conquer Earth and find more than they expected.

The stories are presented with very little in the way of introductory material, allowing each to speak on its own terms. Given both the variety of approaches and the generally high quality of the individual entries, this would be a very good book to introduce someone new to the field to some of its best writers, working the changes on one of the classic themes. Or if, like most of us, you have trouble keeping up with the new writers in the field, this is a good quick sample of what just over two dozen of them are doing.

The emergence of Night Shade as one of the most interesting publishers in the field is due in large part to its fine anthology program, of which this collection and *The Book of Cthulhu* are excellent examples. It would be nice if these books end up in lots of libraries.

ECHOES OF BETRAYAL

By Elizabeth Moon

Del Rey, \$25.00 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-345-50876-8

Moon continues her new series following the companions of Paksenarrion, the heroine of her signature military fantasy trilogy. Each of the protagonists has grown beyond their role in the initial series, and now each must deal with threats to the realms they have inherit-

ed—and to their own new status as the leaders of the struggle against evil.

The action here is concentrated in three areas: the southern city of Valdaire, where a number of mercenary companies are wintering; the kingdom of Lyonya, divided between humans and elves; and the western kingdom of Verella, where magic is feared and hated.

The book is very much a middle novel in a series, and a reader who picks it up expecting a complete story between the covers of this one volume is going to be disappointed—if not confused at the outset, with all the material the author takes for granted that the reader remembers from the previous volumes. There are several plot threads going on, not all of which come to a firm resolution here (although there are satisfactory payoffs, setting up further developments). But the key business is the development of Moon's world and her characters. At the climactic scene of the previous book, she introduced a dragon, a species believed to be mythical or extinct. Now her characters have to figure out how to deal with that significant new presence.

Several characters' careers take on new directions here, as well. A young Verellan squire discovers that he has magical capabilities, and his life is forced in a new direction. A master thief seeking revenge on the guild that expelled him finds allies where he least expected to. There is a royal marriage, which has consequences across the whole system of alliances and relationships in the northern kingdoms. But all these developments are steps toward something further, setting up the next volume—or volumes.

And thanks to Moon's skills at character and scene-building, the reader never feels as if the book isn't going anywhere. She knows how to build tension, how to deliver a convincing combat scene (whether individual or set battle) and her awareness of day-to-day life in pre-modern society gives her fiction a layer of realism one wishes more fantasy writers would aspire

to. And she has a deep concern with the moral issues created in her world, one that gives her characters a seriousness many of the successors to Tolkien have been unable—or unwilling—to bring to their writings.

Moon does a good job of reminding readers of the earlier volumes, *Oath of Fealty* and *Kings of the North*, of the plot points they need to follow the action here. So while this is not a book for those who haven't been following this series, those who have will find it highly rewarding.

**IN OTHER WORLDS:
Of SF and the Human Imagination**
By Margaret Atwood
Doubleday, \$24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 978-0-385-53396-6

A collection of essays, reviews, and autobiographical reminiscences by Atwood, whose fiction, such as *The Handmaid's Tale*, is often unmistakably science fiction. But the author has alienated a number of SF fans with remarks that seem calculated to distance her work from the genre. The discrepancy has, understandably, made many SF fans cranky—it's one thing to borrow from us, it's another to claim that's not what she's doing.

This volume could be seen as, in part, an attempt by Atwood to explain what she meant. She tackles the question head-on, by noting that the genre as we know it is something of a grab bag, pulling in different kinds of fiction that don't necessarily have that much to do with one another. This is in part a result of the history of the commercial science fiction field—publishers trying to signal to readers that the stuff they were publishing was like other things the readers had previously enjoyed. It wasn't the publishers' fault that readers seemed to lump Poe's mood pieces, Verne's explorations of exotic locales, Wells's social criticism, and Burroughs' red-blooded swashbucklers into the same basket. And it was easier to include later arrivals like Huxley, Lovecraft, E.E. Smith—you get the idea—in the already familiar basket than to invent a new one, especially when there

was a preexisting audience for the stuff being lumped together as "science fiction," even if it wasn't clear what it all had in common.

So far, so good. Atwood says that she grew up enjoying the many different kinds of writers we've been talking about, but never thought they were necessarily the same thing. Also fine; being able to make distinctions is the first step toward critical thinking. And it would be hard to maintain that the authors of *Martian Time Slip*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *Ringworld* were in any deep sense doing "the same thing."

But perhaps Atwood was naïve to think everyone would know that's what she meant when she said that *The Handmaid's Tale* isn't science fiction because it doesn't have "talking space squids." Ursula K. Le Guin made very similar statements upon the publication of *Always Going Home*, and nobody especially complained. But Le Guin—arguably the finest living SF writer—had years of built-up street cred with the community; people had enough context to stop and evaluate her statement before reacting to it. But it seemed ungrateful of Atwood to respond to the welcome of the SF community—implied in her receiving a Nebula nomination for *Handmaid's Tale*—by saying her book wasn't what SF readers thought it was. Some suspected her of bowing to the dictates of PR types at her publisher, fearing that being put into a genre box would limit sales. Others saw it as literary snobbery, to put it bluntly.

This book would appear to be Atwood's effort to make up for some of the ill-feeling created by those out-of-context statements. SF fans should welcome the effort; she is a perceptive critic, and a good enough writer that her statements are worth paying attention to, even when they don't fit our preconceived notions of genre boundaries. In fact, it's a good idea to take a look every now and then at how those boundaries look to someone from outside the club.

The first three long chapters, autobiographical pieces, focus tightly on At-

wood's experience reading SF and the many related kinds of fiction—to give her distinctions due weight. Those are followed by a series of thought-provoking essays on individual writers or books—including Le Guin, Orwell, Huxley, Swift, Marge Piercy, and others perhaps less familiar to genre SF readers.

So—it's clear she likes and understands the field, although not all her judgments would necessarily please a majority of SF readers. That's okay—if they did, she'd be considerably less interesting to read. She puts many of our classics into a larger context, one informed by very wide reading both within and outside our field, and that sheds very useful light on them. For example, her comments on Le Guin, noting a duality between “two major parallel universes,” i.e., the fantastic and sfnal elements in her work, are perceptive and useful—

particularly, no doubt, to mainstream-oriented readers who are encountering Le Guin for the first time.

Readers may still find that Atwood's reluctance to have her work evaluated on the same terms as genre SF smacks of snobbery. But reading this collection of her writings about the genre makes it clear that she isn't dismissing the field as somehow beneath her. She clearly knows it well, and understands it—and, just as importantly, likes and admires it, at its best. Her reluctance to be assimilated into it is even understandable—especially from a Canadian, whose cultural outlook may well have been influenced by the undeniable assimilationist tendencies of a certain nearby nation.

Come to this one with an open mind—you'll be amply rewarded. ☐

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Memorial Day is the biggest con weekend of the year. Over the next month, Asimovians might consider KeyCon, Oasis, BaltiCon (where I'll be), BayCon, DuckKon, and DeepSouthCon. London looks set for WorldCon in 2014. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

MAY 2012

11-12—**ZenkaiKon.** For info, write: 421 Evergreen Ave., Hatboro PA 19040. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) zenkaikon.org. (E-mail) info@zenkaikon.org. Con will be held in: Oaks PA (near Philadelphia) (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center. Guests will include: No guests announced. For fans of anime.

11-13—**Gaslight Gathering.** gaslightgathering.org. Town and Country Hotel, San Diego CA. Steampunk and Victorian.

11-13—**StarFury.** (+44) 07930 319-119. seanharry.com. Renaissance Heathrow (London), UK. Commercial SF/fantasy media show.

11-14—**CostumeCon.** costumecon30.com. Mission Palms, Tempe AZ. SF/fantasy and historical masquerades; future fashion show.

17-20—**Nebula Awards Weekend.** sfwa.org. Hyatt, Crystal City (Arlington) VA (near DC). Nebula awards ceremony, workshops, tours.

18-20—**KeyCon.** keycon.org. Radisson, Winnipeg MB. Timothy Zahn, Sue Dawe, Dave McCarty. Literary SF and fantasy.

18-20—**MobiCon.** mobicon.org. Ashbury Hotel and Suites, Mobile AL. SF, fantasy, comics, anime, gaming.

18-20—**NautiCon.** animeboston.com. Provincetown Inn, Provincetown MA. Confab to relax, and plan next year's con. Want to help?

18-20—**Steampunk World's Fair.** steampunkworldsfair.com. Piscataway NJ. "The World's Greatest Steampunk Festival."

18-20—**OtaFest.** otafest.com. University of Calgary, Calgary AB. Andrea Libman. Anime convention.

19—**First Contact.** (+61) 0939-444-901. firstcontactconventions.com.au. Convention Center, Melbourne Australia. Commercial event.

24-27—**Animazement.** animazement.org. Convention Center, Raleigh NC. Noboru Ishiguro. For fans of anime.

24-27—**Anime Oasis.** animeoasis.org. Grove Hotel and Quest Arena, Boise ID. Not connected with Oasis in Florida.

25-27—**Oasis, Box 323, Goldenrod FL 32733.** oasisf.org. Sheraton Downtown, Orlando FL. L. E. Modesitt Jr., D. Weber, P. & R. Sims.

25-27—**TimeGate.** timegate.org. Holiday Inn Select Atlanta Perimeter, Atlanta GA. Caitlin Blackwood. Doctor Who.

25-27—**Anime North.** animenorth.com. Sheraton and Doubletree Airport Hotels, and Congress Centre, on Dixon Rd., Toronto ON.

25-27—**Florida Anime Experience.** floridaanime.com. International Palms Hotel, Orlando FL. Commercial anime show.

25-27—**UltimaCon.** ultimacon.com. Sheraton, New Orleans LA. The hotel's back door opens into the French Quarter.

25-28—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203.** (410) 563-2737. balticon.org. Hunt Valley MD. Odber, singers Dale & Deschamps.

25-28—**BayCon, Box 62108, Sunnyvale CA 94088.** baycon.org. Hyatt, Santa Clara (San Francisco) CA. B. Sanderson, S. Martinere.

25-28—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701.** (608) 233-8850. wiscon.info. Feminism and SF.

25-28—**FanimeCon.** fanime.com. Convention Center, San Jose CA. Anime convention.

25-28—**World Steam Expo.** worldsteamexpo.com. Hyatt, Detroit MI. For fans of steampunk.

30-June 3—**SpaceFest, Box 37197, Tucson AZ 85740.** (520) 886-2424. spacefest.info. Annual space development conference.

JUNE 2012

1-3—**DuckKon, Box 4843, Wheaton IL 60189.** duckon.org. Hyatt, Schaumburg (Chicago) IL. Sawyer, A. & B. Passovoy, Bedlam Bards.

8-10—**AnimeNEXT.** animenext.org. Somerset NJ. A long-running East Coast anime convention.

8-12—**Australia National Con.** continuum.org.au. Melbourne Australia. K. Link, A. Goodman, S. A. Barber, Ditmar, Chronos awards.

14-17—**AnthroCon, Box 476, Malvern PA 19355.** anthrocon.org. Pittsburgh PA. For fans of "anthropomorphics" a.k.a. "furries."

15-17—**DeepSouthCon, Box 610430, Birmingham AL 35261.** dsc50huntsville.com. Huntsville AL. Bujold, Tayler, Nye, Weber.

15-17—**Anime Mid-Atlantic, Box 2636, Glen Allen VA 23060.** animemidatlantic.com. Marriott, Chesapeake (Norfolk) VA. R. Aldrich.

AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—**Chicon 7, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076.** chicon.org. Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrison, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$195.

AUGUST 2013

29-Sep. 2—**Lone Star Con 3, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755.** lonestarcon3.org. San Antonio TX. The World SF Convention. \$160+.

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